

Tying the Gordian Knot



Typewriter King

The Plot

Assimilating *The Gordian Knot*, a thoughtful scholarly essay, explains much of the rationale behind why Roger decided to set a hub in the Middle-East and stake so much on a dangerous project. Gordian aims to set up a major hub in the south of the country, from where he can win over the indigenous Marsh Arabs, particularly the Ma'dan. From there we can conduct deep drilling operations for not oil, but for fresh water. He aims to outpace the marsh restoration project by a number of years, raise a Marsh Arab militia, and branch civilization from his hub.

He bases many of his ideas on a new understanding of Carl von Clausewitz's center of gravity idea, believing that the enemy's center of gravity is a disconnection from the normalcy of peaceful domestic life. From that his corporate cult of personality develops piecemeal solutions to the problems they see coming, and tries to adapt quickly to unanticipated ones. Roger endows himself with dictatorial powers by divorcing his efforts from stockholders and coalition authorities.

With him he takes his most trusted advisors, most notably Vince Scull, an analyst who's earned a fortune of respect from his daring essays. Piecemeal innovations taken include beta-testing the latest equipment for the military, contracting various non-military fitness programs to conduct limited training of Marsh Arabs, refitting scraped tanks into armored personnel carriers, as well as employment of the finest off-the-shelf commercial products.

Although ultimately dictatorial, Gordian delegates a high amount of responsibility to men that only achieved the status of non-commissioned officers in the military. He opts to generally not compete for the high-cost ex-special forces officers grabbed by

other private military companies, but goes after men such as marine noncoms, men adequately suited for commanding small unit fire teams. Because the NCOs are the 'glue' for a fighting force, Roger is convinced they are the ideal leadership for the small teams he puts together, initially teams of six contractors, with Ma'dan filling in the ranks. Gordian's teams are also more international, allowing him to select from a far larger market than other contractors.

Gordian ultimately believes that he can strengthen the average Iraqi through empowering him, and to his business sense, that means bringing products that give individuals order to their region. He sees himself almost as a Sears catalog of the era, and planned a Walmart style logistical system accordingly. His vision is to supply every medium necessary for the Marsh Arab to gain personal empowerment, and through a 'hub and spoke' arrangement, he plans to connect them quickly.

Acknowledgment: The Power Plays series was created by Tom Clancy and Martin Greenberg, and Berkley Publishing holds the rights to the material. I guess they have the legal right to take this text and lock it away in a safe, if they want to.

Contents

1	Tying the Gordian Knot	1
2	Caveat Emptor	14
3	Ex Post Facto	18
4	Quod erat Faciendum	21
5	Kuwait a Minute	27
6	Gordian Talk	35
7	Nom de Guerre	42
8	Casbah Rock	48

9	Les Affreux	58
10	Shato D' Sayfo	65
11	Concrete Proof	77
12	Cutting the Red Tape Knot	85
13	Achtung	100
14	Casus Belli	107
15	Legal Work	119
16	Besieged, Acts I and II	124
17	Besieged, Act III	150
18	Gordian Hawk	164
19	Terminus Ad Quem	181
20	The Chechen Idoru	187
21	Casa	213
22	Helicopter Extraction	230

23 The Gordian Knot Tied	264
23.0.1 Epilogue	286
Appendices	307
.1 Deconstructing the Gordian Knot	307
.2 Deconstructing the Gordian Knot: Soundtrack	312

Chapter 1

Tying the Gordian Knot

‘Wherefore take unto you the whole armor of God, that ye may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand.’ –Ephesians 6:13

NO one knew exactly when the backslide began, but it seemed to begin as a cultural revolution. We do know it roughly started in the best of times, when a wealth of families made good on saving enough capital to leave the urban traps they loathed so much, and uprooted into a more idyllic setting. In this land the phenomenon wasn’t all that unusual, but perhaps, like a twig, the youths snapped under the strain of this latest uprooting, in a long series of re-rooting.

Without a past, these admittedly cultureless orphans of older worlds decided they’d endured the unendurable for too long. They left home yet again on their own volition, to create their own culture in the streets. They placed values on things their parents

didn't see as valuable, and experimented endlessly to find something that would make their newly woven culture unbreakable. They rallied behind a series of social causes, and more significantly, united against numerous injustices, for we all know the journey is the real meat of story, and that journey is only memorable if a conflict breeds obstacles to overcome.

They looked far and wide for injustices, but their parents were benevolent toward them, and made these evils disappear as soon as they were pointed out. Travel became safer, food became more plentiful, and generally, men lived more equally for a time. So the newly self-exiled band searched beyond the protective seas guarding over their own land, and overlooked how their countrymen could improve things in distant lands. They found people with many core similarities, but their lives were not prosperous and just. The exiles found that their fellow countrymen lent assistance to these people, but treated them differently, too. The parchment that granted the countrymen freedoms in their own lands didn't apply to people living elsewhere, so when the conventional countrymen lent distant people help against others, they didn't necessarily bless these needy people with the rights given in the parchment.

Instead, they treated these people as they treated themselves, under their own laws, and these laws were different, indeed. These conventional homesteaders thought this was best, but the outcasts disagreed, and clashed for the cause of punishing their countrymen for not extending their own freedoms abroad. This conflict at home soured the conflict overseas, and the conventional countrymen, who doubtlessly meant well, came home, seen as tarnished by their other countrymen, but they picked up their broken lives, and rebuilt new ones, thus completing the cycle again.

Most did this while the formerly cultureless outcasts reintegrated into society not

quite as victors, but with a measure of power strong enough to preempt their countrymen from effectively outreaching across the seas again.

This new status quo saddened many of the returning conventional countrymen, who didn't see themselves as tarnished, and didn't see the world the same way as the usurpers of power. They saw themselves as the cheated good, the ones most engaged against injustices. They quietly rebelled against the walls placed up, to the disgust of their new enemy, their own citizens.

So over the years, in the same nation, a force of good fought another force of a different good, until the conventional good rediscovered ancient methods of circumventing the prohibitions placed on them.

Their leader was Rodger Gordian, a man imprisoned by evildoers in the very distant land that started it all. His band of warriors proudly carried the moniker *Sword*, a fitting name for a group committed to swiftly unknotting trouble spots wherever Gordian's contacts found them.

The group had resolved problems around the world with scant attention from those at home, but then they encountered a more protracted mission, one with similarities to the conflict that indirectly led to their existence in the first place.

It was widely believed that civilization began on the riverbanks of this place. Men from antiquity built the first homes here, a wise ruler wrote the first book of laws here, and remnants of the first city were still testament to the proud indigenous peoples' claims.

The armed forces from back home, bound together by brave men, nevertheless seemed too shriveled and atrophied to bare the full burden of the task asked of them. So Gordian, the figure intensely loved and hated by the two rival camps in his homeland, offered his

best men and resources to bond with armed forces he'd worked and suffered with in his youth.

He charged his two noblest warriors, Tom Ricci and Pete Nemic, as the spearhead of a committed force. Paul Evens didn't process life the same way most parents did. He never told his daughter that violence never solved anything, because he personally didn't accept that lesson in life. If Evens believed that, he wouldn't have ever volunteered to fly AH-1z Cobras in the Marine Corp, wouldn't have taken part in interdicting the escaping Iraqi Army in 1991, wouldn't have served on the ground in Somalia two years later, and wouldn't have come back as a flight instructor when his phone rang one September day in 2001.

If Paul Evens believed all disagreements could be solved peacefully, he probably wouldn't have insisted on seeing action in the graveyard of the Soviet Empire, even if they had him pounding on the ground. The marines didn't embed him with the Marine Expeditionary Unit on the ground, but he accepted their judgment.

After the military released him back into civilian life, Paul Evens, a retired Marine Master Sergeant, tried catching up on his education; first, in something really soft, like humanities. Some Professors objected to a marine's outlook on life, so he failed some of his early classes, and Paul quickly discovered the subtleties of faking agreement with philosophies that didn't pass his BS tests. The dogma courses were boring, but his day job, repossessions, made up for dulling his wit in school.

Evens had a wife, whom he didn't know very well, and a daughter, a stranger to him. Darlene Evens seemed cold and detached even to Paul, whom doctors diagnosed with slight autism after he came home from Gulf One. Darlene restlessly changed vocations like hygienic people change clothing, and was currently teaching sales practices at a

small school.

When Evens mused over his wife's odd pattern of behavior, which was rare, he concluded she just couldn't tolerate co-workers. Paul, on the other hand, enjoyed his handpicked crew of repo men. They too were marines, all veterans, if only in the loosest sense, though the others had never flown an aircraft.

He liked his job, hated school, and felt content toward his family. Evens lived frugally, using mostly free software in his PC, tending his own vegetable garden, practically building his entire home single-handedly... and living on nearly valueless land, in the northern part of Arkansas. But hey, Memphis Tennessee wasn't that far away!

The community was small and reasonably safe, but Paul Evens felt compelled to resort to violence, in retaliation for violence against his family. Well, maybe he didn't feel the need, rather, he decided a shopkeeper needed to die.

A shame, really, because from what Paul could tell, the thrift storeowner was a pretty good guy. He was Mormon, actually, donated tithes to the Church of Latter Day Saints, abstained from alcohol, led the neighborhood crime watch, always lent a hand when asked, and tied yellow ribbons all over town. His death will outrage the community, but Paul's daughter let him in on a little secret: this all-American good Samaritan became addicted to pornography some time back, and became so contaminated by it, sought release from it's hold in Paul's little girl. For that, he no longer has the right to exist.

Paul, because of his autism, if he believed the doctors, felt no malice toward the shop-keeper, he simply made a judgment call to visit the thrift store while the target used a straw broom to cleanup his sidewalk. Evens, always the actor, forced a smile, and offered his usual greeting.

"How's your world?"

The thrift store-owner smiled with recognition, and stretched out his hand. Paul's own hand bypassed the store owner's, pressed flatly on his chest. Paul's left foot snapped up behind the other man's heel, returned, dislodging his balance. The flat hand pressed ahead, reeling the man's center-of-gravity into traffic, where a barreling jacked-up 4x4 truck shattered the ribcage and the spine.

Paul Evens knew the cameras atop the red light had recorded the incident, but also knew his back and several cars obscured their view enough to plant reasonable doubt. Evens, like most people in the town, knew magnetic coils embedded in the road could operate the motion lights just fine, and that a camera system was simply superfluous. They did something else, surveillance, and no policeman or city spokesmen could convince the public otherwise.

They played the tape for him.

"See that, marine? He sees you, plunges into traffic. Are you seriously going to plead innocent?"

That wasn't the proper way to interrogate someone wired to a lie detector, but what the heck? They don't work, anyway.

"He confessed to me that he craved after women that aren't his wife, and that his illness grew, until he realized he'd never be cured. He told me his fornication became so serious, he couldn't even hide it from his family, and that his wife had given up, and planned to leave him. Do you know a Mormon has to disclose exactly why he or she is leaving the spouse?"

The lead detective scribbled it down.

"I see, so why'd he tell you?"

This is the part where he'd have to disclose his motive for murder, highly dangerous.

He hedged a very careful lie.

“A while back, he admitted engaging in sinful activities with my wife. Since then, I’ve been motivating him to buck his habit, but even with the help of myself and God, he concluded he couldn’t stop.”

Everyone in town understood the good shop-owners convictions, and all would have no problem accepting this fiction as truth. The weary detective sighed, and cut the marine loose.

“Okay, marine, get.”

And that’s how Paul Evens removed a sexual predator from his community.

Not long after this incident, Uncle Sam contracted a chunky Cajun, who didn’t disclose his name, to knock on the repo man’s door.

“Hello?”

Paul focused on the voice, interpreting the voice with considerable difficulty.

“The government needs you for a special assignment, Marine. Good deal with that shop-keeper, the government is impressed.”

His curiosity beckoning, Paul pursued him to the Towncar or whatever it was. He didn’t care for brands.

“Where are we going?”

“Fort Sill. There’s a radioman there you’ll want to meet.”

The driver erected a barricade of tinted glass, and the two men resumed talking.

“We couldn’t help noticing that your humanities classes bored you so much, you took up Arabic as a challenge.”

Paul understood, or at least thought he did.

“I picked up Urdu really fast to teach some Afghans a little about calling in chopper

support. Thought it would help to know some Arabic in advance, should Uncle Sam asked me to instruct somewhere else.”

“I hear you. That’s nice that you planned to come back. Makes things easier on us now.”

To laymen paying casual attention, Fort Sill is just a base for boring old rocket artillery and some military police, but Special Forces Command teaches people how to use radios here, as well.

The barrier lifted for them, and the driver settled into a reserved space near the radio shack.

“Wait here, I’ll rejoin you shortly.”

The door opened, then reopened, and a little dude cut like a diminutive lumberjack came out with a green beret and woodland fatigues.

“This here is 165 centimeters of death, a little man that fulfilled a big job with the fifth Special Forces group in CENTCOM.”

The little man offered his hand, and Paul accepted a shake.

“I know a little about what we’re doing, enough to understand ranks don’t apply. I’m Robin Molina, of Roswell, New Mexico. As you probably guessed, the whites in the army actually think my Hispanic features give me an Arabic appearance. Also, for some reason, no one in the world thinks an American could possibly be this short. How odd is that?”

The Cajun added some more tidbits.

“You guys served purdy close t’gether in Tora Bora. Robin here was in Taskforce 121, until loosing a foot on an undisclosed part of the border. Paul here chased the convoy responsible, so from a point of view, y’all worked together before.” Roger Gordian

lectured a flock of students at Baylor, one of the two finest schools in Texas. It wasn't lost on anyone that the President was as close by as Crawford, but somehow couldn't make the time to make the Thanksgiving visit. They understood something vital must have come up, but doubtlessly, the Young Republicans were disappointed.

"Howdy students, I know y'all expected someone else to visit, but I'm going to make the most of it. I am recognized as Roger Gordian, former CEO of a real important arms contractor. Anyway, I'm here to make a speech about the global war we find ourselves in. How many of you precocious kids had a tree house as a kid?"

"Not that old story again," commented Tom Ricci, leaning against the back wall with Pete Nemic, "he may have played chicken with top Soviet missiles in 'nam, but now the old man's seriously dull."

Nemic may have agreed to a point, but sparred with Ricci out of boredom.

"C'mon, Tom, this is the first time he's told the public this. And besides, he has to saturate the hour with some boring material."

Ricci crossed his arms.

"Here comes that dry old Jefferson quote: The price of freedom isn't... yada yada yada. I'm telling you, Pete, these students don't care about old dead guys in wigs, they want to hear him justifying offensive actions and arms buildups with good old Darwinian Biology. That is what gets a Baylor student turned on."

Pete's face lined with a smile.

"Agreed. I've always been enticed by the market capitalists arguments, myself, but either argument is more appealing than Jeffersonian cheerleading."

"I read you loud and clear, so why can't we convey this to the evolutionary dropouts around the world?"

Nemic closed his eyes.

“Edging that around the shouted ‘Rambo mentality’ libel? I have no idea.” The Cajun directed the driver to catch a direct flight from Will Rodgers to Waco, and the driver made it so, driving the big black sedan past a barn, an oil pump, and a cowboy museum, before finding Terminal Drive.

“Not there, driver, that’s the Fed Ex entrance. Up to that four way, and turn left.”

He complied, and picked up a receipt for free one hour parking along the way. The Cadillac, or whatever they were driving – again, Evens didn’t know cars – found a place up the ramp.

Robin Molina peered at the Air National Guard base several hundred meters away. A big gray C-130 taxied along the tarmac.

“Quite astounding, isn’t it? A certain Ryder truck should have changed the military’s defensive posture in OKC, but nothing but a chain-link fence and a short sprint separates all the people here, from all uniformed people over there. Screwy, isn’t it?”

Evens had a quip ready for this occasion.

“Well, look at your hometown. Interstellar invaders crash in your backyard, yet I haven’t seen you checking the sky for tractor beams.”

A sidewalk path with an open roof separates the Will Rodgers terminal from the parking lot. Once the three men dismounted the top levels, they crossed this gap, where a lady customs officer with a silver revolver glanced over, saw no luggage, and dismissed them.

The three passed simple museum displays of Native Americans, settlers, the airport’s namesake humorists, and Wily Post.

“This state is landlocked, isn’t it?”

The question came from Molina.

“Yes, it is.”

“So why do they have a display featuring a pirate?”

Evens followed Molina’s finger to Post’s image, and shuddered.

“Shut up, Molina.”

Paul Evens made model planes when he was a kid, but couldn’t remember if Fokker was a Dutch, or a German business.

Whatever it was, the plane they took to Waco was a Fokker type that seemed a near clone of the 737 shuttle.

“Is there a chance we’ll see Air Force One in Waco? I hear the President is keeping it there, ’cause it won’t fit on his ranch.”

Evens, trying to catnap, leaned in his reclined seat, and rested a moist towel on his face. Flying isn’t fun when he isn’t the pilot.

“I don’t think Waco can support a 747-400, but yeah, there is a chance we’ll see whatever he flew in on.”

The chunky Cajun, who finally revealed his name as Thibodeau, Rollie Thibodeau, corrected him.

“Why, Waco’s got a runway, uh, eight thousand feet, I think, that will accept anything less than a B-52H. I do know it can accept the President. You were thinking of the Clintons’ vacation getaway. Different president, different place.”

“Hey, wasn’t that Margaret’s Garden?”

“Martha’s Vineyard,” bit Evens, “now shut up.” Later that night, Rodger Gordian appeared via satellite on Larry King, following up on an episode with Ross Perot. King took the night off to observe the holiday, so a junior reporter discussed Afghanistan with

the boss.

“Well, I’ll tell you why our current force capability is adequate for the Afghan mission. Afghanistan is a land-locked country, unable to support a long-term occupation. We have even fewer friendly countries surrounding Karzai’s State than Iraq. If we tried to sustain a major presence in the country, we would be compelled to maintain an uncomfortably large ‘air-bridge’ (cargo plane supply line) over Pakistan, The Peoples Republic of China, India, Iran, or Russia. I’d rather keep such traffic down. Search-and-destroy type operations continue around Bin Laden at the division level at all times. Such divisions may be marine expeditionary forces at one time, or may be an airborne division, like the 82ed ‘all Americans’ and the 24th Mech, some of our best. The other half of the Eighteenth Air Corp, by the way, is in Iraq.”

“Army Special Forces are popularly called the ‘Green Berets,’ though an SF guy will protest, ‘I’m not a hat!’” The cub reporter inserted a brief joke, and let Gordian finish.

“The Green Berets are working closely with the new afghan Army to multiply our strength there.

In my view, the Pro-US Afghans are far better at policing their country than the Iraqi police will be in five years.

True, Karzai doesn’t have the support to control much more than Kabul and Kandahar, plus the area in between, but he really doesn’t have to, according to SF ‘hearts and minds’ doctrine. Under the plan, our coalition can win by demonstrating that we better understand the indigenous villagers than the Taliban and Al Queda. Basically, we fight as Robin Hoods as a battle tactic by mending fences, going on patrols with local militia, and subtly educating communities by giving friendly advice.

Air support can return any time, if necessary, and opposition currently can’t even

mass a fight at the battalion level around government strongholds, even around Tora Bora.”

Gordian had done the impossible; he'd expressed a fairly competent view of military doctrine on cable TV. Unfortunately, no one watched the news on Thanksgiving, except news junkies. Be fair, Rodger, Ross and General Shelton were also pretty smart.

“Thank you, Sir. Rodger Gordian, former CEO of UpLink Technologies. Coming up next, what was Brittany thinking? Hey, does anyone want to hear about the Laci Peterson case after that? Stay tuned to Larry King Live!”

Oh boy.

Chapter 2

Caveat Emptor

‘The air strike will not only diminish Colonel Gadhafi’s capacity to export terror, it will provide him with incentives and reasons to alter his criminal behavior.’ –President Ronald Wilson Reagan 1986

‘We know we can’t make the world risk-free, but we can reduce the risks we face and we have to take the fight to the terrorists. If we have the will, we can find the means.’ –President William Jefferson Clinton, as quoted in the *Gore Report*, 1997

‘The security council put the final touches yesterday on a written demand that Iraq cooperate with international arms inspectors- but threatens no force if Baghdad fails to comply.’ –Associated Press, 1998

Quotes and resolutions don’t alter the physical reality of the world, however. The F-111s flown out of England hit barracks occupied by members of Gadhafi’s family,

but not by the Libyan leader himself. In 2004, after the 9-11 Commission asked CIA Director George Tenet how Osama Bin Laden ‘escaped Predator drone crosshairs three times,’ his explanation was technical. He explained the UVA didn’t yet have the capabilities it now holds, that back in the day, the best it could do was call in a Tomahawk strike from sea, that a 45 minute delay would exist between target acquisition and the arrival of the missile.

But these explanations are in the future. For now, it is March of 2003, and the American public hears no arguments for air strike options. They have more faith in air power than Billy Mitchell did at his most extreme. If you can drop a ‘smart bomb’ in a pickle jar, why do you need to send a tank to crush it?

Ruzhyo, a former Spetznez agent, slips into Northern Iraq via Turkey, where Turkish soldiers suddenly jumped into the war. A convoy of Ural flatbed trucks bounce down a dirt track. The Russian arms merchant is a wealthy Oligarch, the country’s new class of ‘capitalist pigs’ loosely affiliated with the so-called Russian Mafia.

The Retired elite soldier rides atop crates of his country’s superior Kornet (AT-14) ATGM system. Russians understand better than Americans the need for the proper tools to carry out one’s political will. This missile is ideally fired at tanks from BMP-3 infantry fighting vehicles, but can, and probably will, be fired from the shoulder in this conflict.

Doubtlessly, the Americans in the pentagon of theirs will angrily demand the Turks surrender their ambitions, drawing the meek Turkish reply: “We were only trying to help.” The American aircraft will spare their NATO partner’s soldiers, and everything will return to normal. No harm, no foul. Except Ruzhyo and company will have transferred the arms from trucks to smaller caravans by then, and newly acquired danger will

appear in postwar Iraqi cities.

Ruzhyo takes special care to keep himself and the Kornet stash far removed from the GPS jammers and NVG (Starlight scopes) coming out of Syria. The Russian remembers to keep his carriage far to the right of the Tigris at all times, so as to avoid the air strikes. *Those poor saps.*

Overhead

After more than twelve years of the Iraqi air defense playing smart, the airmen aboard the USS Abraham Lincoln were briefed that for one special night, they would lapse into not being so bright. The HARM anti-radiation missile seemed to teach the SAM people in charge of the KARI defense network to never shine too brightly or too long at a NATO plane; cold lessons at the hands of aerial knights had taught them that, but now, a spook, what's his name? Goodly, Goodman? This good guy gave one of those dreadfully cryptic briefings. For some odd reason, spook tech crews gimped over, totally mute, and retooled all the HARM seekers. A national intelligence matter, the good guy said, and had the ordnance crew fix them to Hornet hard points.

So the spook says fly over Northwestern Iraq, and you'll find such-and-such type of radiation emitting at such-and-such point, and we want it dampened by the anti-rad missiles.

So after re-tanking from some KC-135s out of Qatar or Bahrain or wherever, a flight element of F/A-18c jets flew uneventfully to a cluster of life parked outside Syria.

Detection equipment warbled. The EA-6b Prowler crew, probably less cryptically briefed, talked them through the firing process. That's all it took. They didn't even properly see where the rads were coming from, and didn't see the points-of-impact. No

Bomb Damage Assessment follow-up flight would ever be called.

The microwave emissions- they were microwave- flickered dark, forever silenced.

Right Side of the Tigris

Ruzhyo also didn't directly witness the unwitting beacons die, but when the flight of Navy planes barreled over his Bedouin camp, he figured the Saddam paramilitary buddies had switched on the Global Positioning Jammers. *Well, that's just what you get for broadcasting yourself to the Americans like that. Radiation kills.*

"Let the buyer beware."

Chapter 3

Ex Post Facto

‘Diplomacy is the art of saying ‘nice doggie’ until you find a rock.’ –Will Rogers

‘Don’t go around saying the world owes you a living. The world owes you nothing. It was here first.’ –Mark Twain

San Jose, California

JT is the December of 2003. UpLink decides to integrate their Sword operatives with guys like Robin Molina and Paul Evens into the force, but spend time integrating them in before flying to Kuwait City. Tom Ricci spent the days between Thanksgiving and the start of Hanukah showing these two the special weapons and vehicles to be used in Iraq. Robin, who’d studied up on some of Sword’s special tools, inquired about the VVRS, the Variable Velocity Rifle System, and the special functions he’d

only read about. “We don’t need to get into that,” said Ricci, “because we’ll combat test the Alliant Techsystems XM8 carbine. This gun will find use within the regular army taxpayers normally pay for. Enjoy the guns. We’ll actually get a DARPA grant for using them.” *Good deal*, Molina thought, aiming one down range, *but surely a coalition member would willingly do this for free. Well, ours is to do and die, with the coolest toys.* “Mind if I shoot the rifle version, too?” Later that day, the team drove across the border to ride some desert vehicles in Baja. For the longest time, they didn’t see much but mesquite and all the other things that reminded Molina of home, until Tom signaled left to a barb wired plot of garages, the source of a loud diesel engine. Ricci parked the hatchback where they could see just what caused that sound. “That looks like a seriously caliber-deprived tank,” Robin deadpanned, after glancing at the tracked vehicle. “Those are our wheels. Scully made the call that Iraq is too dangerous a place for us to drive around in light-skinned vehicles,” spoke Ricci, referring to UpLink’s risk assessment analyst, Vince Scull. Paul hazarded a question. “And exactly what is his definition of a thinly armored vehicle?” Tom Ricci politely chuckled. “Same as mine.” They kept a respectful distance, as one lumbered around the obstacle course. It took the first hill, a four foot sand berm, pretty well. “We’ve been kicking the idea of copying the Israelis for a long time, but didn’t do it until now,” Ricci shouted over the mechanical uproar, “but once the coalition- you know- the one Iraq’s denial minister said would never come? When the coalition liberated the country, we hired some Kuwaitis to organize our own ‘liberation’ of some old Soviet hardware for us. We’re doing a lot of the same things the Israeli Defense Force did with their Nagmash’ot and Nakpadon heavy APCs, except we’re building up from T-72 chassis, instead of the old Centurion tanks they used.” The tank, no, armored personnel carrier (APC), faced them, and rushed

forward. “Isn’t that Pete?” Ricci didn’t answer, but Paul was pretty sure. “Those cars- is he nuts?” The big Sword armored car jumped a dune adjacent to the cars, and destructively drove along. “So, ah, do you like monster truck rallies?” It was merely a crash course, as the operatives, ever the punsters, classified it. They adapted well to the top-mounted gun, the old ‘Maw Deuce,’ the Browning M2. “Now for the music piracy enthusiast.” Pete Nimic triggered another chain-fed gun from his APC. “This is the MP3 another .50 (12.7mm). Electrically fired. The firing rate is a lot higher, but we shouldn’t need it. We’ll field the battle tested Maw Deuce instead. Best not to carry too many experimental eggs in one basket.”¹ “So what are we calling these vehicles?” Robin was curious. “A fortiori. The boss named them. It means with stronger reason. Latin.”

¹Nota Bene: The Browning M2 dates back to the later years of World War One. A lot of critics out there state the Iraqis were defeated with Bill Clinton’s military. I only wish our stuff were really that new.

Chapter 4

Quod erat Faciendum

‘Every man is guilty of all the good he didn’t do.’ –Voltaire

‘A fool’s brain digests philosophy into folly, science into superstition, and art into pedantry.

Hence University education.’ –George Bernard Shaw

October of 2003

Q surgical hack works as follows:

Vladimir Plekhanov sits at a console somewhere in the Caucasus, and decides he isn’t too fond of OBL’s sort of ‘help’ in the struggle for Chechnya.

The date is October of 2003, and the Opera House attack changed Plekhanov’s mind about the Mujihadin struggle. At his keyboard, the Russian rectifies a mistake he’d made in cooperating with the Arab. Iridium’s 24 commercial communication satellites are in extreme low orbit, ready for a final plunge into the Pacific Ocean.

Plekhanov simply captures the source code and makes a simple change in a western debugger.

‘If = then go to access accepted’

One only has to change the equal sign to unequal.

‘If \neq then go to access accepted’

There’s your Boolean logic for you. Broken down to assembly, you get one number for true, and one number for false. Simply change one number in the right space, and things are turned upside down without a single flag being thrown up.

This is textbook, but sometimes when programmers are pressed by a deadline, or they just quit early to watch DBZ, they’ll resort to shortcutting security. (The empirical data indicates the number of successful hacks shot up when DBZ episodes were first aired in the United States.)

When somebody successfully breaks in, just blame it on the mythical super hacker, then repair the problem. (Meaning, upload saved copies of whatever pages were defiled, read some manga, and the myth will protect you, as long as the baby boomer bosses don’t catch on.)

Everyone’s talking about the Russian hacker with Chechen sympathies turning on Bin Laden. Okay, we’ve covered 101 hacking, now time for 101 physics.

If you’ve taken high school level physics, you probably know that mass multiplied by acceleration will equal force. Okay, so let’s say each satellite weighs a hundred metric tons. What happens when one hits the Earth at nearly 9.8 meters per second? The authorities would rather spare you from the mental gymnastics. You nearly get a metric megaton from every satellite.

Now, Vladimir Plekhanov figures OBL, or UBL, depending on which paper you read,

is holed out where he stayed when the Soviets went after him, probably a cave somewhere north of Peshawar. He decided the first impact should be at the coordinates thirty-four degrees north of the equator, and seventy degrees east of Greenwich. Surely the equivalent of 24 tactical nukes nailing Northern Pakistan would get him, but Vladimir's personal doctrine of overwhelming firepower dictated that he should add the Compton Gamma Observer, too. That heavy scientific bird should come closer to a Hiroshima.

With a chuckle, he prompted Mikhayl Ruzhyo with an Instant Messenger.

Wheelman (Vladimir): "John of Patmos gave me special mention in his book."

Rifle (Ruzhyo): "And how is that?"

Wheelman: "And there fell upon men a great hail out of heaven, every stone about the weight of a talent, and men blasphemed God because of the plague of the hail; for the plague thereof was exceeding great."

Rifle: "I see. That comes from Revelations, all right. So you did it."

Wheelman: "Yes."

Rifle: "Is Anna feeling well?"

Wheelman: "She responds well to the new anti-angio genesis drugs coming from Roche."

Rifle: "Great. Tell her 143, please? BBL."

Wheelman: "BRB."

Doubtlessly, the National Security Agency's Echelon orbiting ELINT birds could find the uplink. If not, the United States should just fold as a country and invite some other nation to run business. Surely, they'll know who did the deed, and their analysts will deduce why.

Nationalist Chechens no longer want jihadist backing.

Quod erat faciendum, thought the Russian expatriate, as he disconnected his terminal. *That which was to be shown, now is. Tell the Americans their new doctrine works, sever ties with those their President is after, and they'll leave you alone to fight the Russians. Just as long as Ruzhyo keeps them from finding a foothold, they'll never come into the Caucus now.*

I'm no giver. My good deed is done, now to do for myself. He strolled to his garden, snipped some tea leaves. The date is December of 2003, and the team walks across the terminal of Hopkins International Airport, in Cleveland, Ohio. Protesters encircle the Abrams plant in Akron, and CBS strangely has a reporter covering from Cleveland. Paul recognized the reporter, a middle-aged Caucasian male with thinning blond hair, as an airline correspondent.

Should have worn a different shirt, he thinks, as the camera focuses on his 'Press Relations' shirt, with his favorite Emoticon stamped on the torso:

:-x

"Excuse me, you look like a strapping young fellow. What do you think of the passive resistance demonstration at the Akron plant?"

Paul Evens, retired Marine, considered thoughtfully.

"Well, I'd be mad too, if the automobile industry tied me down to the cars churned out in Detroit. Internal combustion, limp pieces of aluminum, and draconian complexity rolls out of Detroit and Tokyo. They have every right to demand the safety standards set in Akron." The airline reporter wiped his gleaming forehead.

"Sir, the protesters are demonstrating over their use in Iraq!" Evens feigned confusion.

"I can understand their jealousy, sir, but do they want our boys driving Detroit cars

in Baghdad?” The reporters abruptly moved on.

Well, that one’s good for faux news broadcasts.

Robin rushed over and grabbed a hold of him.

“Evens, nobody’s going to think that’s funny!” Paul feigned hurt, then burst a heavy chuckle.

“C’mon, what was I supposed to say? You can’t balm some people’s feelings sometimes. They’re only hurting themselves by picketing blue collar labor, anyway.” Molina scoffed.

“Hearts and Minds strategy doesn’t allow for frivolous blunt-force trauma, Marine.” Evens replied in the same tone.

“I thought we weren’t into propaganda in our country.” To the Marine’s surprise, Robin muttered ‘propaganda’ like a curse.

“You don’t understand my trade, Jarhead.” The Master Sergeant didn’t understand what got to Molina, but both skulked apart. Tom Ricci and Pete Nimec also tried making light of the current state of affairs, as they supervised the transport of the heavy IVIS boxes and infrared pods needed for their fortiori vehicles.

“Try to view the nation as an organism,” suggested Ricci, “as the body grows tired, a wave of relief, called endorphins, will see us through this war.” Although Nimec never wavered his practiced eye on the crowd, he expressed a smile at the ex-cop.

“I like the analogy, but what do the endorphins represent?”

“A moment of Zen? Beats the heck out of me. Sorry, but this moral support stuff is just too far out of my character. Go jump on Megan’s lap or something.”

“I now think your analogy sucks. So there.” The marine and the special operations force guy walked in circles for a while, seeing holiday paraphernalia strategically located

by carefully calculating marketers.

Evens sensed something about the reporter or something had gotten to Molina, but couldn't get it together. *Was it something I said? Perhaps he believes I'm angry? I was just jesting with the reporter. I could tell him I'm not bothered if he's cool. One shouldn't allow these things to linger. Fix the team. We need an integrated core.*

The intercom temporarily calmed, and pedestrians could hear an unusual pop song about postcards featuring primates.

Hey, nutty stuff usually cheers that Molina right up, judging from what I know of him. Could this balm his ails?

Chapter 5

Kuwait a Minute

‘The trouble with socialism is that it takes too many evenings.’ –Oscar Wilde

‘Suppose you were an idiot and suppose you were a member of Congress. But I repeat myself.’ –Mark Twain

They took the great circle route over Northern Europe and the southern portion of the Confederation of Independent States (Russia) in a commercial Boeing flight from Cleveland to Kuwait City.

Ricci, a Boston native, didn’t sleep on the plane, nor did he read on the flight. Roger Gordian had trusted him when he arranged Director Mueller to grant a team member a right-to-carry permit on the flight. Ricci took the honor seriously, and remained hunched at the ready, with a sig .40 holstered over his right kidney. No other passengers carried firearms, said the pilot. You’re the air marshal, sailor.

He refrained from alcohol, again reading, sleep, bathroom breaks, any diversion. He'd handoff to Nimec once the flight touched down. They all had concealed body armor, not really more than level one Kevlar vests, but there was that.

Boy, coffee makes one want to persistently trickle. Try crossing your legs. Nuts, try an upright posture.

The pilot is letting everyone know the tower has cleared them to land. Down they go, changing air pressure with it. Earlier, he'd considered letting go in his coffee cup, but now, in the airspace of a Moslem country, even one as tolerant as Kuwait, no way. He knows holy law. Thieves lose hands, adulterers may be stoned, and Tom Ricci could face amputation for public relief.

"The Taliban punished homosexuals by toppling walls on them."

Pete replied. "Sorry, did I nudge you in a suggestive way?"

Ricci issued a subdued laugh.

"I was just thinking about what type of place we're going into. Clerics sanctioned such penalties. Now if you'll excuse me, I'm going to take a leak. Hold this for me."

Ricci handed off early, and as an afterthought, flicked over the folded permit.

But it was a bad time to leak in the loo, for the United flight touched down a little sharp.

"That's right, crap all over me," he fussed over his wet khakis, dampened by a roiling toilet. He gravely stormed out to his overhead storage compartment, and removed some spare jeans.

"Hold the lavatory!"

They meet a really strange fellow after disembarking. Nimec identifies him as a South African associate, one that had been a great help in defeating Harlan DeVane and

others in places such as Sierra Leone. He wore a cocked bush hat, had a gray rattail, sloppy mustache, and other hints of a survivalist lifestyle.

“Robin Molina, Paul Evens, this is Nigel Braun, an early co-partner in Executive Outcomes.” They shook hands.

“It’s a pleasure. EO is now defunct, but I still have a skill to trade. I’ll show you to the convoy.” He performed an about-face, and skipped to a land rover.

“He looks kind of like Ted Nugent, doesn’t he?” Evens agreed with Molina.

“Had my picture taken with the rocker at Bagram. I think you’re right.” They chased him to the cars, and let themselves in. The driver managed to twist around, and offered a hand.

“Fraser Singe, one of Her Majesty’s Gurkha riflemen. Nice to meet you.”

The two Americans rephrased and repeated the greeting. Singe shifted into drive, and cautiously stopped at the exit.

“So Evens, Nimec says you had a hand in plugging the highway of death,” said the Gurkha, casually, as he merged into traffic.

“Yeah, with a Super Cobra, the AH-1z. Some of the cars looked like this one.”

Wrong thing to say.

“Yeah, I was afraid of that. Most of the craziness is north of the border, but I’ve heard of so-called Westerners being killed over here, too.”

“Your definition of western civilization doesn’t match theirs, does it?” Molina speaking.

“No, it doesn’t. Your public speakers are being too kind. Some people in your United States think much like the Jihadists over here, and your officials correctly call them xenophobic. Skinheads, you call them, right?” Without waiting for confirmation,

he sustained his monologue.

“They do their level best to murder anyone trying to import their skills into Moslem countries, in the name of purifying their faith. I call it diluting the region’s skilled labor force. After all this time killing off trained individuals, they wonder why nobody knows how to fix something. This is madness. Kuwait’s better than others, though, kind of like India, if you think about it. Awe, here’s the hotel, the Hilton. We have a whole floor.” They pulled in behind a crime scene. Two corpses in scarves and hoods lay prone beside pools of blood and Warsaw Pact weaponry.

“Like I said, they aim for foreigners over here, though the indigenous population has accepted the worldwide culture. I understand some of your people aren’t fond of Africans some 350 years after they arrived. Here, you Americans have come to expect us to just hand these out.” He snaked one hand over the backseat, and dropped two kukris.

“These are some of the more stylish types. Just give me a Glock, and we’ll call it an even trade.”

The hotel bellman showed them to the proper floor, expected a gratuity, and received a meager one. It was an unskilled task, after all. Evens offered a comment about the air conditioning, Molina said New Mexicans never complained to outsiders.

“Dry heat my arse,” replied Fraser faux-irritably, “what do you bloody think the moister level is in Kuwait? Heat is a hellish condition, no matter.” The bellman handed Singe the keycard, apparently because he sounded more British, and made his way down the stairs.

“Gee, I thought you’d get the card, Evens,” Molina observed, “because you appear more Anglo than Mr. Singe and me.”

“We aren’t supposed to profile anymore, yet people still hunt for a convenient way to categorize. That begs the pressing question, if these guys unconsciously insist on finding a master in every group, will they ever really become democratic?”

“The Sheik,” Singe, slid the keycard through the lock.

“India has a caste system, and the British Empire/ Europe long had an aristocratic system. Most people in these lands now elect legitimate Republics, so don’t write them off.”

Riyadh, Saudi Arabia

Plekhanov spent a long session with Mikhayl Ruzhyo, explaining in great length why the Chechen needed to leave his dear wife during the holiday. It is Christmas, a holiday Ruzhyo had come to appreciate during his days in camaraderie with the Russians, and one not really observed in the kingdom.

Saudi Arabia is in a divided state now, somewhere between an absolute monarchy, and a theocracy. The princes repeatedly tell their benefactors/consumers how they’ve adopted all the modern glories of the secular west, and promise the peculiar religious police will be swept away in good time.

The thirty-four-year old wet works specialist didn’t hold a firm faith in anything but his own craft, but wondered suspiciously why the western thinkers demanded the end of religious observations.

In the hospital room, while Anna slept, he’d tuned in to Atlanta’s all-day news station, and pondered over a case involving a popular judge in the American state of Alabama. He’d only been a teenager when the Berlin Wall fell, and Perestroika had been the rule for several years before that, but men of age spoke of such things back in the

dark days. Many freedoms were tightly regulated, but they'd had cathedrals operating even under the Stalinist regime. Albania had been the only nation in the bloc to formally go beyond the 'religion is poison' rhetoric, and shut down all religious institutions.

Worse, Enver Hoxha carried the revolution to extremes that made no sense even to the most open thinkers (who he'd doubtlessly have killed). He abolished all military rank, constrained the 'People's Military' to a static battle plan, isolated the state from everyone, and madly constructed a meaningless system of useless bunkers over the countryside.

This guy fit Reagan's descriptions of communists perfectly, had doomed his people, and left them with a military impotent to stop the Serbs in Kosovo, and yet, here are a group of Americans, senselessly advocating the same things. Madness.

Anna looked peaceful when he left. Plekhanov now has the doctors exploring stem cells. That means having a baby, and in her state, Anna can't go through that, so they're also looking at a surrogate. Ruzhyo had heard some horror stories about that, but Plekhanov assured him the child would come to no harm.

In the meantime, Anna was looking toward chemotherapy.

One can't get a beer in Saudi Arabia.

Kuwait City, Kuwait

The team filed out of the Hilton before the morning call to prayer, before sunset, perhaps in the last part of the day when the illegal street races were still the biggest threat to western motorists.

Ricci and Braun sat in the middle seat of the lead Chevy Suburban, the sort of vehicle typecast for this sort of role. Forces from the Kuwaiti Emiri Guard weaved around them

on motorcycles, occasioning some words of familiarity from Robin Molina, who'd taught them some fine points in radio procedure in the late nineties. He didn't see the irony as he broke radio protocol to chatter with them.

Evens, sitting behind the wheel in the same Land Rover, expressed amazement at how familiar Molina was with all the Guards.

Robin remembered kids, wives, dates-of-birth, and soccer statistics in the leagues Kuwaitis followed.

"A radioman's key duty and diversion are the same," he explained offhandedly, "and in special operations, particularly foreign interior defense, my private cup of tea."

In the convoy, most of the men handled Belgian FN P90s, a polymer submachine gun with ambidextrous fire control, one of the major draws over the H&K (no, not Hugs-and-Kisses!) MP5s. Called Tupperware guns by some, designers conjured the venerable weapon for use by dismounted tankers.

Someone dismounted from a Land Rover can make use of one, also.

Pete and Fraser tailgated behind at a stop. A McClarin F1 seeped a thick miasma over the roadway, a dense oil-vectoring pall on the roadway.

Ricci S-turned without warning, faintly fender-bending one of the Emir's finest. He was okay, and dodged Evens, who'd decided survival followed Tom Ricci, so he would, too.

Pete mimed them both, turning broadside to the expected, a pack of shooters wearing bandoleers of rocket propelled grenade rounds, and flannel or checkered shirts, shooting while crouching behind palm trees and well-watered Bermuda grass.

"My apologies to the officer I hit," Ricci repentantly stammered, "uh, I must not have seen the signs."

Fortunately, the Emir's finest had a rudimentary understanding of English, and an appreciation for spiritual functions in daily life. Many such people live in these parts.

Chapter 6

Gordian Talk

‘The world may politically, as well as geographically, be divided into four parts, each having a distinct set of interests. Unhappily for the other three, Europe, by her arms and by her negotiations, by force and by fraud, has, in different degrees, extended her dominion over them all. Africa, Asia, and America, have successively felt her domination. The superiority she has long maintained has tempted her to plume herself as the Mistress of the World, and to consider the rest of mankind as created for her benefit. Men admired as profound philosophers have, in direct terms, attributed to her inhabitants a physical superiority, and have gravely asserted that all animals, and with them the human species, degenerate in America—that even dogs cease to bark after having breathed awhile in our atmosphere...Let Americans disdain to be the instruments of European greatness! Let the thirteen States, bound together in a strict and indissoluble Union, concur in erecting one great American system, superior to the control of all transatlantic force or influence, and able to dictate the terms of the connection between the old and the new world!’ –Alexander Hamilton, in *Federalist 11*

‘Show me where globalization is thick with network connectivity, financial transactions, liberal media flows, and collective security, and I will show you regions featuring stable

governments, rising standards of living, and more deaths by suicide than murder. These parts of the world I call the Functioning Core, or Core. But show me where globalization is thinning or just plain absent, and I will show you regions plagued by politically repressive regimes, widespread poverty and disease, routine mass murder, and most important the chronic conflicts that incubate the next generation of global terrorists. These parts of the world I call the Non-Integrating Gap, or Gap.’ –Thomas P.M. Barnett, U.S. Naval War College, in *The Pentagon’s New Map*

‘British Service-men were held for two days in June 2004 after apparently straying into the Iranian side of the Shatt al-Arab waterway.’ –Wikipedia

The Sheik and his town council chain-smoked British brand cigarettes, carelessly fuming them at their foreign guests in the Ma’dan village’s reed-roofed cinderblock guesthouse, over a dinner of lamb and some of the remaining marsh rice. The town, like most Iraqi towns, is not tied into the world market, and the food set before them on ruddy clay plates are all they have.

The Sheik is a man of about seventy, with gray facial hair, and male pattern baldness. His skin is slashed in dark spots. He remains thoughtful in his countenance, taking long drags on his filtered smoke between every slow thoughtful phrase.

“Those forsaken jets scared the sheep for the last thirteen years straight. What have your leaders been thinking?”

Robin Molina used his trained speaking skills to lecture in a non-patronizing way, a difficult feat in this portion of the world. He excused America’s leadership as weak over that period, and in their weakness, devised an unsavory way of pushing at Iraqi leadership.

“But in the current time, our leadership is not in such a frail state, and neither are

our people.”

The old Marsh Arab coughed in a weakened attempt at laughter.

“Very diplomatic, Boy, as long as your words don’t get back to your former leadership. You have the ear of the Ma’dan, but please, eat.”

No women sat at the rug, and most of the Arab men were of ages close to the Sheik. His oldest son, a man of just over thirty, was the youngest. He eyed the guests as one would poison.

The sheep had been slaughtered specially for a meal with the guests, Molina understood, and did his best to demonstrate how much he savored the gesture, without appearing to view his hosts with condescension. He genuinely liked the hospitable people, though secretly wished they’d quit smoking.

Of course he lit up too, just to fit in. Assimilating with these guys will be essential.

They stared at one another in careful contemplation, until they chased their meals down the esophagus with golden tea, and silently belched.

“That was delightful, Sir.”

“You’re welcome, Friend.”

As mentioned before, UpLink’s new heavy armored personnel carrier is based on the same concept as the Israeli Defense Force (‘Zionists’ to you Jihadists out there) heavy APC Engineer Corp types, like the Nagmachon, Nakpdon, Puma, and Nagmasho’t, and Israel’s ‘real’ APC, the Achzarit.

Like the Achzarit, Sword operatives in Iraq drive a vehicle built up from a Russian chassis. Achzarits are built up from T-54/55s ‘liberated’ from neighboring Arab nations, while Roger Gordian built his personnel carriers up from the Republican Guard’s finest T-72s.

The gunning system up top is similar to the IDF's overhead weapon system (meaning you can shoot without sticking your head out) except Sword's system was built in Ohio, and fields more firepower in the .50 variety, rather than the Achzarits' .30.

Nigel got to drive, a process requiring the manipulation of a yoke, a steering mechanism like those used by bomber pilots.

In the back, Pete had a lot of questions for Robin.

"What did we accomplish tonight, Soldier," he asked conversationally.

Robin measured his reply carefully.

"Well, Sir, we established a friendly dialogue with an influential Marsh Arab Sheik. I think he likes us, or to put it more honestly, sees a way he can use us for his benefit. He must not be ruling absolutely, or else he would have made a proposal right there."

"Or else he's by nature just really slow to come to a decision," countered Paul tiredly.

"There is that," Robin agreed.

"He probably just needs privacy while discussing it with his inner circle," argued Nimec, "then he'll sleep on it, see if it passes his gut check, and invite back for further talks."

They dropped the subject, and stared out the small gun ports, perhaps gazing at the stars, or following dust particles wafting to their rear.

Earlier

There is a small Texas gas refinery town of around three thousand that is said to pump noxious fumes that sting the eyes and cause feelings of nausea to those not accustomed to the refinery gases. The people that live there are said to get over it soon enough, and people of all ages go on with their lives as if it is normal to 'tough it out'

breathing poison mist.

The Sword operatives entered Basra, a huge oil-refining town of 900,000, on the six-lane highway that crosses from Kuwait to Iraq.

Some British infantry halted them by the rock quarry to the left, where the team has their new infantry carriers. The Tommy in charge traps his SA80 under one shoulder very carefully, so it wouldn't break.

He spoke with a stifled Birmingham accent.

"How do. Just park these vehicles at the left of that shanty there, and your cars will be inside."

"Thanks."

"Pleasure, Chap."

Some of the other Tommy Boys unveil the garage contents; Roger Gordian's Fortiori T-72 based infantry vehicles. One was started up, puffing CO in the large hangar, but apparently not very long, because the contracted mechanics hadn't yet suffocated.

They parked where the soldier told them to, and exchanged welcomes with the pit crew. A heavy stereo played a local radio station with a terribly loud disc jockey.

"Good Morning Basra! This will be another bright day. Why? I've got a countdown. Ten, the sun is out, nine, I'm on the air, eight, electricity is up at least ten hours a day, seven, you aren't using flash-suppressing ammunition, six, the refineries are always burning off some gas, five, my listeners are bright people. What, I can dream, right? Four, some Yanks with yellow teeth are visiting, three, the brass is on an inspection tour, two, the press adores flash photography, and one, something always explodes here.

Right, fine, I'm not Letterman. I'll play a song, that fine?"

Pete and Tom told the soldiers where they planned to take the heavy monster, and

asked what roads to take. They brought out a young butter bar, an officer of about thirty, who said he thought the expressway was hardy enough to withstand the tracked vehicle.

“I guess we’ll give it a try,” said Nimec, dubiously.

A few minutes later, they took the sixty-ton monster, weaving around Japanese motor vehicles. It turned out the road could support the vehicle, as it did every time the Republican Guard convoys marched these tracks through. How many times did they move mechanized forces down this roadway? Fighting had been heavy between 1980 and 1992, and the population fell nearly in half over that period. The refinery had been destroyed in Desert Fox, only to be rebuilt in time to smuggle 1.5 million barrels of refined oil into Syria before the war (source being Reuters).

They hold the route until Pete took the turnoff to the levee road, and northeast toward one of the few remaining marsh areas in Southeastern Iraq.

In one of the few remaining marshlands, they meet the Sheik at a tribal guesthouse, and talk about a number of things.

Molina handles the discussions, being the green beret trained for handling these talks. He artfully nudges conversation into those most dangerous topics, the ones most flammable. Steady now...

“Are the insurgents harassing you, sir? You want to know what we can do for you? Well, my government has a fantastic corp of engineers; just give us a chance, and we’ll fix things. Are you upset over that whole Saddam draining the marshes thing? We are too, and sorry about that, but our leaders didn’t foresee that madman being so crazy, sir.”

That would be the forward and quick way of handling it, but the New Mexican kept

the discussion sensitive, and before going, set some rules for Ricci, Nimec, Evens, and the others to follow.

The coming danger of reviving the marshes is that this could become a haven for rebels/terrorists/what have you, against the new government, as it was with past rulers. Negotiate with the sheik, and help out in daily chores with the men. Avoid female interests, because the Arabs won't like that, and show them how it is possible to live off desert land. Drive some of the hunters out in the sand, and demonstrate how to capture rodents and snakes, collect dew, and track. Also give them a shooting course, hand out rifles and ammunition, and do the same with radios.

If they could follow those rules, fine. After dinner, they drove a little further north, to set camp for the night.

"Did that go well?" Paul Evens, not sure how astute he was, asked a basic question, while spreading his bedroll.

The area they chose was a dead salt encrusted lowland desert where the palm dates looked dying and stunted. Rebels may come here, and if they do, well, that's trouble, but they have no chance of catching anyone off guard out in this dead land.

"Just fine, so don't worry about it."

Evens replied to Molina.

"I wasn't worried. I understand Ricci will be the sentry tonight."

"Yep."

Chapter 7

Nom de Guerre

His name wasn't Peter Strelak, just as Mikhail Ruzhko wasn't born with his name. The name fit well enough, however. Strelak and Ruzhko ran the hit with Grigory Zmeyev, though they kept the snake's role simply less vital.

Ruzhko had expressed his distrust and dislike of Grigory earlier with Strelak, and arranged for a fourth man, Job Geroj, Ethnic Armenian, to back up the snake.

Geroj, he had not chosen that appellation. Strelak and Ruzhko had given it to him because he had a tendency to join teams as an afterthought, a plug added to keep a detail from unthreading. Such role-play could be invaluable to them inside Al Mamlakah al Arabiyah as Suudiyah.

Crown Prince and First Deputy Prime Minister Abdallah bin Abd al-Aziz Al Saud are in charge of the country. The people aren't as rich as casual western observers seem

to think. The per capita GDP is merely \$11,800, unemployment is 25, and most telling of all, no one has ever developed their proven natural gas reserves.

The kingdom is a dangerous place. And it will only become more dangerous, especially in the foreign and diplomatic quarters.

Al Mabaheth, the kingdom's antiterrorist police, will react to any attacks, if they're fast enough, that is.

Hezbollah, the same organization that mortars Israeli towns, killed 19 American airmen in the Khobar Towers bombing on June 25, 1996. The bomb damage looked eerily like Oklahoma City one year before. That attack was in turn, of course, only two years after the WTC bombing. In those attacks, Ramzi Yusef and Timothy McVeigh were captured, but in Khobar, the White House didn't make any 'demands for justice,' even though the Saudis detained a litter of likely suspects.¹

They had one last meal at a Saudi McDonalds. Grigory had a super sized Mac, and the others ate more sensibly. Strelok and Ruzhyo avoided carbonated beverages, and Geroj abandoned his Dr Pepper after thinking it over. Grigory super sized a Sprite, and cursed the clerk for not stocking alcohol.

Ruzhyo had tried reminding the Snake that a McDonald's wouldn't even serve alcohol in Ireland, but no use.

After eating, the four of them broke apart, taking their own routes to their posts. Ruzhyo walked freely with his air taser, a model with a twenty-foot reach. Attired in loose fitting black, he jogged alongside a Mercedes convoy to one foreign compound gate. The three cars waved the banner of the united Germany.

The assassin stopped for a patrol detail, a foot patrol attached to the compound.

¹I'm not making any of this up: just ask Director Freeh, if you can contact him.

“Good morning. Do you speak English?”

They didn't seem so threatening. Both wore windbreakers with side arms and batons, but besides those articles, they were just flunkies with radios and pointless badges.

“Da, enough, sirs.”

A Russian, not a typical threat in the Kingdom. Russians have a high energy demand, too.

“Good, sir. We need to search you, just a routine pat-down.”

He let them, and one second under his jacket, they found the taser.

“Are you registered to carry this in the kingdom, sir?”

He carefully, slowly, reached his back pocket, flipped open the wallet containing his permit.

“Yes, sir.”

Everything looked in order, but they resumed the frisk just in case.

“Okay, just show your ID at the gate, and the gatekeeper will square things up real quickly.”

The two guards walked to the curb, and seated in a motorbike. These guys run a regular patrol, as the Russians had learned when casing the area. *It will be a few minutes, for sure, although to their credit, they have a varied routine.*

Ruzhyo hedged a glance in the distance, saw a light flash in a minaret. *Strelak is in position. Grigory is at the appointed bus stop, so two are seen in position, and Geroj must be at the appointed position between them. Swivel, and continue the walk toward the gate.*

He hears the percussive play of children, a rubber ball, and the wall, before reaching the gate. The guard asked to see his pass via a small closed circuit TV camera. Like

using an ATM, he extracted a thin card with a magnetic strip, and inserted it, then punched the pin sequence.

“Have a nice day, Mister Leary.”

The card’s magnetic strip had been skimmed from a nice Scot they’d mugged after following him on their last casing. The binary information and a memory of the four digits tapped on the back were all they needed.

“You have a good one.”

He’s in, and the gate slides toward its latch. Ruzhyo allows his left hand to linger in the left pocket, even as his right fingers enfold over the taser.

Strelok should be aimed at the guard’s chest. Just a few seconds.

Sheathed around the guardhouse is the miracle Ge Lexan Polycarbonate Resin, a formidable bullet stopper. Current specs are high enough to stop the best Barrett sniper rifles, but the heavy gauged RAMO 650, chambered for 14.5x115 Russian anti material ammunition, can do it, firing a 63.4 gram shell at 1,000 meters per second.

Peter Strelok’s internal magazine allowed him the luxury of repeating his semi-jacketed feat six more times. This he did as fast as he could pull the bolt and depress the five-pound trigger.

Ruzhyo side-stepped wide of the discharged gun, but in clear view of the guard’s still functioning personal computer. The steel darts of a taser are propelled by compressed nitrogen and conduct 50,000 volts of electricity into whatever it comes in contact too.

The wet works agent illuminated a garnet dot on the monitor, in the middle, just over an archeologist’s shoulder.

The archeologist on screen aimed her .45 Colt pistol skyward, as if blaming an Egyptian deity for the incoming shock. The dart punctured the glass, carried a current to

the cathode ray tube, overloaded it, and spread poor Lara Croft around like a download from Napster.

The compound's copper-wired Ethernet cables offered transport to the 50,000 volts, so Lara didn't go to pc heaven alone. The whole base faced overloads. Cameras died, communications faulted, automatic sentry guns shorted, and no advantages of the integrated defense remained.

Some twenty meters away, a berserk armored zealot lined an MP5 up from behind the rear Mercedes. Strelok is gone now, and wouldn't have an angle up if he did.

The Chechen shot first, using a Bulgarian .32 key chain the frisk missed— Ruzhyo didn't— one thumb clicking the firing button in his left hand. Left foot forward, and matching shoulder pointing at the target, he discharged a .32.

The armories neglected the neck. The shot dipped under the chin, and shocked the jugular.

Fall back. The Mabaheth react too slowly. Their first responders catch a spike strip, shredding rubber down to the rims. Steel catches concrete at high speed, grating badly. One agent radios in the predicament, then dismounts with a Kalashnikov. He pulled the charging handle, and looked down range as a heavy Japanese van storms at the gate.

He removed the muzzle nut in advance, and attached a grenade. *Can this stop the murder?*

Out of his peripheral senses, flak slips in, a deluge of bullets. *Duck, look.* Two men, one behind a palm, the other under a bench, both with machine pistols. You're punctured, bleeding, lying under the curb. *Only a small gap exists between them, so the grenade is beautiful!* Ruzhyo ran like it was nobody's business. He returned the key chain, still harnessing a full barrel, to one front pocket, and snapped another shot onto

the taser.

Strelok should have keys in the ignition by now. Ruzhyo may ride with him, but if he doesn't show, a car awaits at the McDonalds.

He doesn't wince as the bomb explodes. *Don't look back at Gomorra.* That was the van, demolishing the structure and people beyond the gate he'd opened.

He heard Zmeya and Geroj shooting, then a more disturbing punctuation- then more Micro Uzi action. *That's welcome. Geroj deserves survival.*

Chapter 8

Casbah Rock

I honestly don't know if the Clash recordings are property of Epic or Sony right now. Initially published by Nineden Limited Press, back in the day.

YLadimir Plekhanov wasn't above reverse-engineering old Trojan Horses. He'd gone online with a previously pawned laptop in the Caucasus, rode with it on a train ride into Europe, and borrowed a copy of the 'Backdoor Orifice' Trojan for removal on RW compact disk.

Before burning the information to disk, he'd grabbed a CMOS destroyer and various other useful kits, and added some harmless HTML source.

The procedure took very few minutes to complete online, before he shut down the connection, and let the laser etch 4,000 bits every second. He'd barely had time to close

the monitor and rest a Kalashnikov vodka atop the pc before the machine ejected his disk.

Hmm, they make great guns and drinks. This is a sure benefit to the world. A cup holder beside the Russian then housed the glass. Plekhanov clapped the window hinges, elevated the glass. The train turns a mountain corner, along a ridge hundreds of feet above solid ground.

Pines and Douglas firs mark the tree line against a clattering of a drab pool of exposed serrated stones.

Below, a polecat dashes clear from a tumbling laptop. It skips like a moonwalker, hopping a few short jumps before a great leap. The railcar now coils around the mountain, no longer granting the Russian a view. It's gone.

He pads his pocket one last time, confirming the RW disk is safe. Radio talk host: "Hello everyone, here is the list of coalition countries, in alphabetical order, as of March 21, 2003. Let's see if I can avoid denigrating them, while recalling something about them from the top of my head:

Afghanistan (a new national army)

Albania (at least they aren't a people's army any longer)

Angola (Executive Outcomes kicked their rebels for them)

Australia (these guys served as shock troops for the British. Hoorah!)

Azerbaijan (locked in a perpetual civil war with Armenia)

Bulgaria (served as a talent pool for KGB wet works)

Colombia (Los Pepes and a lot of other hard groups)

Costa Rica (whoremongers and anarchists)

Czech Republic (they make good arms, and they're the homeland of hockey's greatest

goaltender)

Denmark (dorks like Hamlet)

Dominican Republic (the better half of Hispania)

El Salvador (home base of the Contra Enterprise)

Eritrea (better than Djibouti)

Estonia (Baltic state, right?)

Ethiopia (I can only remember the MRE joke)

Georgia (did anyone else see that RPG ambush on their president?)

Honduras (isn't all of Latin America the same, anyway?)

Hungary (Vlad's mortal enemy)

Iceland (Bjork)

Italy (gladiators)

Japan (Gundams!)

Kuwait (seeking revenge)

Latvia (a lot of mail-order brides come from here)

Lithuania (my favorite Portland Trailblazer was born here)

Macedonia (Alexander the Great)

Marshall Islands (island chain)

Micronesia (island chain)

Mongolia (the army of the Khans)

Netherlands (crack-heads and whoremongers, and also Paul Revere)

Nicaragua (Contras)

Palau (where on Earth is that?)

Panama (Operation Blue Spoon. Finished them in a couple days)

Philippines (Moro Moslems. Took three years to pacify them)
Poland (Is God on their side? Is the Pope Polish?)
Portugal (good exit out of Nazi Europe, I recall)
Romania (a bloody place in 1989)
Rwanda (tribal conflicts, remember? The UN said “never again,” then Kofi and co. forgot)
Singapore (did the Japanese really conquer them on bicycles? They tend to give Admiral a lot of trouble of his fanfictions)
Slovakia (split from the Czech Republic)
Solomon Islands (another island chain. No, King Solomon did not have gold mines here)
South Korea (Daewoo, Chan Ho Park)
Spain (Franco was a pig, and don’t forget the Inquisition)
Turkey (the Armenian Genocide)
Uganda (1976, scene of a great hostage rescue)
Ukraine (Isn’t that just Russia Junior?)
United Kingdom (exported a culture and a language around the world. Staunch allies, and Phillip Sidney, my favorite poet.)
United States (My nation, and Superman’s, and host of my alma mater)
Uzbekistan (would been a great staging point for bounty hunters. The Aral Sea, drained by evil Soviets)

Well well well, that was my word association list. Now it’s time for a word from our sponsors!” Another radio personality: “Feel that itch? There’s war in Djibouti. Better dig it out— but don’t forget to apply rich creamy Anu-Ease. Anu-Ease is a topical

cream applied to the area of greatest tension. Better dab a whole tube over the Sunni Triangle!”

The Forty- the applied nickname for Sword’s new APC- ran a speed test unbuttoned over salt-encrusted dunes in the low-level area once overrun by swamps and runoff water from Shat Al Arab. Several other Fortiori T-72 based infantry vehicles rubbernecked in a cowboy patrol in a dead area. A state-sponsored radio sounded some rock between Letterman style attempts at humor by excitable disc jockeys.

Nigel had turned the dial higher at hearing word of EO, his old firm, then lost interest in the broadcast. The air was cool. Moving as fast as it was, it felt great. Fraser Singe had the wheel, or rather, the yoke. Paul Evens looked out up top, manually at the helm of the Browning. Fraser and Nigel acted as the veterans on this trip, just giving a scenic tour of the open desert. The atmosphere was mellow, serene. This ride was the desert pasture scene viewed by anxious parents on FOX News or CNN, or just maybe on another service with embedded journalists, during the armored march toward Baghdad in the Spring of ’03. This ride is uneventful, and planned to be so. It is a dry run, a rehearsal for later rides embedded with the Ma’dan, the people they have the best dialogue with so far.

The radio plays a familiar anthem, with the familiar piano riff. Molina tried singing along. “Now the King told the boogie men, (unintelligible . The oil down the desert way Has shaken to the top. The Sheik he drove his Cadillac He went cruisin’ down the Ville The, um, something, was a standing, On the radiator grill...” He tried to drag the other into the chorus, waving. “Um, words, Rocking the casbah” Nigel begged a question. “Hey, Robin, would you kindly tell what a casbah is?” “An old section of town in a Middle East or Northern Africa.”

“Oh. Carry on.”

“The Shariff don’t like it Rockin’ the casbah Rockin’ the casbah.”

Molina jabbed at whatever came within hitting range, aping the electric camel drums. He whistled with the fighter planes. Down the casbah way. Fundamentally, the crew loved it. You know they could dig it.

You know they loved taking five, Listening to that crazy casbah jive. Over the frigid moonlight of an Arabian desert, moist air condensed into thick droplets of water on a massive plastic sheet lain out by a band of battlefield contractors.

The dew converged to the center of the wide sheet, where a large bucket rests to collect the harvest. The reservoir quenching occurred before the attentive eyes of a tribe of displaced and disserved Marsh Arabs.

Peter Nimec and Thomas Ricci of Roger Gordian’s Sword arm of UpLink overlooked the perimeter while Robin Molina and Paul Evens listened to their new Arab friends beside the water. The Arab elders freely expressed their applause over the westerners’ clever techniques. Molina accepted their kindness, but amended that the idea came from African Bushmen, except they used eggshells.

“Follow me, and I’ll show you something else,” he invited. They grumbled over having to walk across desert, but obediently followed, expecting another pleasant surprise.

They got a tied plastic bag.

The Special Forces radioman snapped open his folding Kbar, sliced the bag clean. Careful not to reach in, he emptied the contents; a wire bird trap with a live occupant.

“I put a small sliver of lamb meat in here earlier, and waited for a carrion to fly after it,” he explained, regarding the fowl.

“Would you accept this bird as a gift?” He addressed the Sheik.

“Of course, many thanks, American.”

Molina cautiously grasped the handle, trudging the bird over. The avian panic didn't falter throughout this time.

“Here you go. It should go well cooked extra crispy.”

Sunrise broke their first camping trip. The other Sword operatives came out and exchanged simple parting pleasantries with the indigenous Arabs.

Evens handed a Glock Type 26 to Singe, and whipped out his kukri, just to nonverbally remind him of their trade. He made a few stylish slashing moves at eyelevel, then re-sheathed the bladed weapon.

All-in-all, they rated this a great cultural exchange. Several of the men carried homemade zip guns fashioned after the classical car antenna design, with .22 long pistol bullets nestled smugly inside the soft metal tubes.

A spring plunger struck a nail to the bullet's primer to fire.

Plenkanov willed it that the unskilled ‘punks’ of the operation, displaced Palestinians from Jordan, carry these dangerous and inaccurate amateur guns in the operation.

These thin weapons most fortunately vanished from sight when hidden on the inside of the belts worn by the Palestinians. Rubber bands fastened them in place.

These young men had walked their operation routes regularly to school and prayer in the passing days and weeks, in distant eyesight of the target, a cinder-block police station, with matching walls and a guard shack. In light of the recent violence, a stack of sandbags affix the side facing traffic, and razor wire sprouts to the sky.

Two young officers, dressed in white headdresses and smoking from a hookah (water pipe), sat under an FN MAG heavy machinegun.

These officers become alerted by the street gang, even though they've seen them several times in the passing weeks. It is a fact of life that Saudi police officers now fear their own population.

To the officers, several older boys are playing a cruel game of keep-away with a smaller child's pen, or so it seems. An important westerner ventures out from a buddy's Lexus, and talks on a cell on his short walk to the station. The kids are converging on him. This could potentially flare into an international incident if the peacemakers don't pacify things.

One cop moves in, making a show of handling his baton. One big kid is making a face and gesturing to the shiny pen upraised in his left hand.

He holds it at eyelevel. All the kids have pens now.

"Help! Please help, I'm bleeding!"

The officers inside hear gunshots, and the shocked ravings of a westerner crying in English. Blood searing from multiple entry wounds stains his cotton shirt, and onto the downed officer he drags in from the shoulders. A second officer, also hit, rocks his MAG into operation. He gives descriptions of the perps over the radio, and advises that they're retreating.

The westerner lets trained professionals look over the downed man, and declines immediate attention for himself. He seems confused at how to dial his cell phone. Perhaps he's using an emailing function.

NO!

The four round Yugoslavian cell phone gun and the familiar key chain weapon sufficiently served Ruzhyo one last time. He didn't muse over how grizzly or barbaric or even how professional the hit will look around the world.

The ballistics of the .32 Bulgarian gun will match the bullet retrieved from the compound hit before. Profilers will naturally run circles over this being some sort of professional's 'calling card,' and they'll indeed be right that both hits involved the same professional. He gave a transient thought to whether or not they'll link the .22 soft-jacketed cell gun rounds to the same killer, or decided two shooters entered the station together.

No matter. In the end, six Saudi cops lay dead with small-caliber holes in their heads.

Ruzhyo vacated the station with a folded four-inch long chrome Stinger pen gun fixed in one hand. This firearm he'd hidden deeper on his person, as part of his exit strategy.

A rimfire cap embedded itself in the MAG operator's skull.

Mission complete.

```
Wgsa(config)#interface e0/4
```

```
Wgsa(config-if)#port secure max mac- count 112
```

Before leaving, Ruzhyo completed the task Plenkanov had instructed him to do, adding a bot to the police network. This he accomplished by jabbing a USB memory device onto a terminal.

'#port secure max mac- count' means how many ports are secure on the police network. The number previously allowed on was 112, as shown above, but the bot managed to increase the number to 113. Because the same amount of digits are coded, and because security administrators don't usually look through this stuff, the change probably won't show up in any intelligence dossiers any time soon. This is a vital part of yet another surgical hack.

```
Ethernet 0/113 Enabled
```

Wgsa(config)no-address-violation ignore
Confirm?
OK

Chapter 9

Les Affreux

‘If we bowed to your demand today, we would be asked tomorrow to ban the army from using teargas and sound bombs,’ –One Israeli Supreme Court Judge, in a decision ruling the use of flechette shells legal.

‘We hang the petty thieves and appoint the great ones to public office.’ –Aesop

‘From a historical basis, Middle East conflicts do not last a long time.’ –Vice President Dan Quayle, 10/2/90 (Moronic, right?)

InshAllah: God Willing — *Illhamdillah:* Praise be to God’

⚡ The core principle behind showing the Ma’dan how to retrieve their own commodities was based on the understanding that Mujahedeen prowled to interdict logistics routes.

UpLink's risk assessment analyst, Vince Scull, had a think tank and roster of test pilots exploring the best ways to make safe drops of everything needed, so in time, the Marsh Arabs will be free to consume goods from the outside more safely, but for the next few months, supply refreshments would be tenuous.

No worries, the Sword Operatives seemed fit to merge the desert into the global market, InshAllah, and life will be better with men like Molina and Nimec, Illhamdillah.

Today, these operatives wheeled a select group of the boys away in their Forties- their APCs- for a fishing excursion by the coast. It was an all-daylong task, but in truth, these youths had nothing better to do. Best if they bring back a nice catch.

The Sheik sat restfully with a fragrant Turkish cigar gnashed under his molars.

InshAllah, one great mother of a catch will come back, Illhamdillah.

The Gulf

Robin Molina, Paul Evens, Nigel Braun, and Tom Ricci, park a half-dozen Ma'dan youths in a leviathan Forty beside the sea. They take the trip south aboard a British or European controlled amphibious assault vehicle, under the recommendation of Scully, before disembarking on a shoreline well recovered from the oily mess of thirteen years ago.

“We are actually within the borders of Kuwait,” Ricci announces, “as added insurance against being interrupted.”

He wades from the APC first, toward a beige-and-black tent pitched a couple hundred feet ahead.

Plain-clothed contractors mill about bench tables and jigsaws. Welder plumes arc luminescent smithereens over the tent roofs.

“Boys, this is just one of the fabrication plants we have running to provide affordable tools beside the job site. Come take a look.”

He waves them along to one secluded table. ‘A redneck exhaust pipe,’ liberated from a mutilated monster truck, or so it seemed, lay at the table center.

Nigel Braun, the South African veteran of many wars involving privatized military firms, cradled the object in his arms.

“You see all those seagulls on the rocky shore?”

They followed his eyes, seeing them flock out of reach of the tide.

“Now you see a feast!”

He triggered a tempest of near-hypersonic flechettes and ball bearings, over-killing by incalculable factors.

The pictorial beach tinted red, foul, murderous.

“Whoa oh! All alright, kiddies, bag all those fowl, and stow them in the forty! Yeah! Next, your safari guide will show you how to fish with a frag grenade!” Joel Soler, as coincidence would have it, is a real-life French filmmaker that actually has footage of Saddam Hussein’s passion for grenade fishing, in the documentary, *Oncle (Uncle) Saddam*. In the film, Saddam himself actually slings grenades in a pond, and orders a frogman in to retrieve his kills. And they say redneck games aren’t universal.

They say, well, actually, Israeli Military Historian Martin Van Creveld says, that the longer two opponents face one another in combat, the more alike they’ll become, because they’ll acquire survival traits from one another.

Under this reasoning, it should be no surprise to anyone that the American GI adopted the “Fritz” helmet, that Yankees built up an ironclad force, and that a United States Privatized Military Unit shared a fishing technique with a sworn enemy of fourteen

years.

“Some of those poor buggers are going live crawling at the bottom, too maimed to breed, miserable, with wrecked bladders and cuts open to infection, so don’t use this method too frivolously, you hear?”

They didn’t, but Nigel Braun chose to go on with his illusions, roaming the beach, taking a swig from a bottle no devout Moslem would touch, as a searing flame encroached on the cigarette butt nestled between two fingers.

“Bag those Pisces tight, and don’t forget to vacuum those sacks with the fancy pumps, we’ll need all the space.”

Thomas Ricci, Sword operative, retired SEAL, dismissed cop, professional fisherman in his own right, walked alongside the South African post-apartheid professional soldier, identically dressed in khaki shorts.

“I thought the aquatic population would be thinner than this,” commented Ricci, “so Nimec and I decided we’d fry the fish guts, and feed them to the kids, so they’d get fat.”

Braun chuckled.

“That’s the way to go. Back when I was a kid, we thought that was candy. We’d saturate it in oil, and bake it until it was all crusty. We didn’t know about cholesterol, and you can bet the farm I’d prefer the blissful ignorance of these kids,” pointing at the Iraqis, who are spearing shish kabobs in the sea, “and taste the joys of old fashioned cooking, rather than live old and crotchety.”

“But science and Eve not leaving things alone ruined all that,” observed the SEAL.

“Amen, buddy, don’t burden them with nutrition yet. Code level black, and all that.”

Iraq

It was as useful a stakeout as any, sunken off road, slowly turning the tracks through a ragged course selected for terrain masking,' and it made a nice entry-level op for the Marsh Arab militia fighters.

Fraser Singe, one of Her Majesty's Gurkha riflemen, and Intel Chief, Peter Nimec, supervised eight friendly Arabs in hot sands- January hot sands- of an empty pasture a few hundred meters from a newly strung power line.

Fraser stirred a new packet of dehydrated punch flavoring into a pitcher of water every quarter hour. He'd just finished stirring in the last batch of fruity granules when Pete traded shifts on the Maw-Deuce.

"I just finished talking with one of our friends. He says he'll want all the paper cups when we're finished with them."

Nimec perplexed Singe.

"What for?"

"He wants to see what applications papier-mache products could have in Iraq between now and whenever the country is plugged into the international market."

"Hold on, he didn't say if, but when?"

Hmm

"Yeah, but he thinks he'll have plenty of time to compete locally on a few items made of papier-mache and clay. He has my blessing."

The two stared thoughtfully at the Forty's broadside graffiti art:

Si vis Pacem, Para bellu: if you want Peace, prepare for War.

Nimec hedged a question.

"So Fraser, why'd you come to Iraq?"

The Gurkha rubbed his chin.

“Because Angelina Jolie refused to adopt me. No, I’m a top-dollar professional soldier, doing the Queen’s work while collecting a wage unknown to Nepal. I also liked Mr. Gordian’s mission statement. I probably wouldn’t be here if I wasn’t aligned with Sword.”

The bass sound of a Honda truck dislodged their discussion.

“Here they come,” Pete announced, “let’s prepare to engage.”

Nimec rounded up the team, offered reminders and pointers.

“This is kind of like capture the flag. You four,” he pointed out the individuals he wanted, “follow me around the left flank here,” he demonstrated with his hands, “and you guys are the flag defenders. One, stay at the wheel, you there, stay at the maw deuce, and you sir, keep a lookout at the door. That leaves you. Assist Mr. Fraser with the mortar if he asks.”

“Let’s go!” In a minute, it became evident the truck riders were indeed the electric wire bandits, as Nimec, lying prone behind a pebble dune, used his lapel radio to relay what his eyes told.

Arab men in gray coveralls roped up creosote poles. Some other men looked on. An RPK gunner regularly rotated 360 degrees, while perched atop the white truck.

With GPS, calling the coordinates came easy.

“I’ve got the truck. HE round, fire!”

The round fell in the cabin, causing the shockwave to push the metal frame outward. The RPK man somersaulted clear, much like Paul Hamm’s Olympic performance.

The landing didn’t match up.

“Just a notch to your left, fire for effect.” Singe did, hitting the twisted pickup bed’s

flank, causing a break-dance spin.

“We have them outgunned. Drive up the dune, and show them the .50, why don’t you?” Within seconds, the burglars faced the forty head-on.

“To arms, my brothers, let’s hump it across this road, and what awaits us.” They arrived in time to grant quarter to the few surviving thieves.

Chapter 10

Shato D' Sayfo

I'll have to provide a little background here, before continuing. If you want to pass, move on to the big bold words.

Over three-quarters of Middle Eastern Americans are indigenous Christians and are neither Arab nor Muslim. What accounts for this? The Ottomans did a little ethnic cleansing during World War One, killing Assyrian, Syrian, and Armenian Christians by the thousands. These killings surpassed Rwanda and Sudan (two other cases of Moslems committing genocide against Christians), but as of yet, the international community still doesn't recognize these atrocities. Hold on, Sudanese Christians, it could be a while.

Meanwhile, you may have to go through it a few times, for according to the Assyrian Nation Online, such crimes against the Assyrian people were committed 33 times in the years between 339 AD (or 'Common Era CE,' if you're rabidly secular) and 1992.

They list the exact years as following:

33
448
519
661
686
737
852
873
884
987
1014
1072
1258
1268
1285
1289
1295
1297
1310
1578
1842
1850
1860
1895

1915

1933

1941

1945

1946

1962

1969

1985

1992

That's an average of once every fifty years, but notice they start before the rise of Islam. Even based on this limited information, one can deduce the problem is more socio/economic than religious.

By the way, the one committed in 1933 is the fault of the Kurds, so consider those two groups fractured, or at least full of issues to work out.

Thus ends my incomplete exposition.

Shato D'Sayfo

'I Was Wrong!' –Reverend Ken Joseph Jr. (Assyrian), reflecting on his decision to be a human shield for Saddam.

'At that time there will be a highway from Egypt to Assyria. The Assyrians will visit Egypt, and the Egyptians will visit Assyria. The Egyptians and Assyrians will worship together. At that time Israel will be the third member of the group, along with Egypt and Assyria, and will be a recipient of blessing in the earth. The Lord who leads armies will pronounce a blessing over the earth, saying, "Blessed be my people, Egypt, and the work of my hands, Assyria, and my special possession, Israel!" ' –Isaiah 19:23-25

22km (13.5 miles) Northeast of Cairo

A fog drifts over the field in the early pre-twilight hours of Cairo, giving the grounds a superficial O'Hare appearance as a silver DC-6 cranks four powerful new turboprop engines, and roars to life.

The craft has an airbrushed pinup on the nose, and two rows of pale blue running lights along the wings. The pinup girl, specially made as a holographic painting, actually waves at the maintenance crew as the plane barrels down the runway.

The ultra-new power plants pull the airframe off the ground after a short buildup of speed, far faster than the old piston plant could hustle, and after a brief moment of suspense, the Douglas Continental Six lunged skyward.

The craft continues a northeast heading, leaving Cairo International Airport and the Al-Orouba main road behind.

Paul 'Pokey' Oskaboose, Dan Carlisle, Ron Newell, and Neil Perry, all veteran Sword operatives, had rested six solid hours at the Sheraton Hotel Heliopolis, before a wakeup call from (0)2 291 4255 bolted them toward their rented Avis BMWs for their propeller flight that morning.

Pokey had command over the other three, and the composite force of Pesh Merga and other pro-US militia onboard.

Most of the militiamen are jetlagged from a long flight from Norfolk, Virginia, and try to spread out in the bare steel cabin, attempting to dream through the flight.

The week of training in Moyock, North Carolina may have also tired them a notch.

A lot of investment had gone into these 100 Iraqis, roughly \$1000 each in just a

week in the USA, a week of training equal to the refreshers America's finest cops go through, but look at the comparative advantage. One hundred thousand bucks is what, one/twentieth of a Bradley fighting vehicle? And look at the returns they can have, in comparison to that ALUMINUM! inanimate object. Quite a bit more, potentially.

Skull and Ricci had been the ones to press for it, and without an iota of resistance, Gord had parceled out the money.

Now, less than two weeks later, they make their first combat jump. The plane, it's really not that different from a C-118 Liftmaster, circa 1946, fundamentally not unlike a C-47 Skytrain, or 'Gooneybird.' Reference Steve Ambrose's runaway hit, if available.

Somewhere in the black void below, was the jump site. Not much happened until Oskaboose got the door.

"Attention! Stand up, hook up. I remind you, stand up, hook UP!"

The men got it. You attach the line hanging off the fuselage to the 'chute.

"Equipment check, sound off!"

I'll save you some time. Suffice it to say, numbers one through 103 all gave variations of an affirmative.

"Close up, in a nice row, and stand for your turn out the door."

Their turns came, hastened by Oskaboose's rally cry: go!

The loadmaster booted them into a hurricane force wind, in a sky only faintly illuminated by the climbing twilight.

The 'stick' (line of jumpers) took two minutes to empty.

The men fell, holding tight body positions until they ripped their cords a couple hundred feet later.

Somewhere in the landing zone, Robin Molina supposedly had a PAQ-10 laser des-

ignator flashing them. The jumpers didn't know it, but the cargo crates- correction-smart cargo crates, followed his beam. Luckily, Robin also flashed an infrared strobe light, something the Sword operatives could navigate by, using NVG scopes.

Now, hitting roughly 125MPH winds, freefalling, Oskaboose, Carlisle, Newell and Perry had to keep their peepers on the beam, and reserve enough situational awareness to link up with the one hundred indigenous jumpers, who are falling blind, and plant them reasonably close to the LZ. Sound easy? Definitely, and that's why the burden is actually reversed.

See, the Sword guys panned some feint line-of-site 'cat eye' flashlights around during the fall, beaconing the Iraqi jumpers closer.

Pokey kept a growing tally from none to a little under twenty before noticing how the scrub under his feet jumped at him. Molina's light filled his entire view.

Perhaps, though Pokey, I've kept my eyes on the ball a little too well...

Touchdown: Pokey's feet snag on a fallen crate, a risk Skull had warned about. Inertia, and the dragging 'chute, hauled his shins over the box. One hand works under his belly, unlatching a point on the harness. The curved blade of a kukri severs another strand.

"Hola, Amigo. Did you bring the movie?"

Luckily, the Dupont polymer absorbed the lion's share of all the rough-and-tumble, and all 104 jumps managed to strut away unattended.

Most didn't fall very glamorously, however. Dragging one's tailbone along the pebbles seemed a favorite. Thus was born the name of this hundred: 1st Iraqi Butt-Dragging Company, or Butt Company, for short.

On with the mission, they liberated their parachutes, and bagged the eighteen pounds

of fabric, as gifts to the town's people.

Pokey addressed the men on the march, reminding them they moved to "make friendly contact with the 2.5 million Assyrian Christians in Iraq, drop off the film, and march to the extraction zone."

Logically, they rushed like an invasion force- at dawn. Nineveh is a northern town just a stone's-throw from Mosul.

Few people are up at this hour, but yes! The church is open. The Assyrians, members of the Chaldean Church, are Christians who attend worship services in Aramaic, so they considered it a blessed occasion when an UpLink team, escorted by a small contingent of armed Kurdish Pesh Merga arrived with all the film equipment needed to play Hollywood's first and only feature film recorded in the dying Aramaic tongue.

"The gore is pretty rough in this, but this was the best we could find," cautioned Robin Molina, just before the film began reeling.

"They can tough it out, no problem," opined Pokey.

"Dude, no problem. Now let's get out of here."

Nowhere, Southern Iraq

Driving north from Kuwait, Paul Evens surveyed the remains of his handy work, and once again reviewed the charges issued by former US Attorney General Ramsey Clark. Citing Article Three of the Geneva Convention, Ramsey alleged that Evens had slaughtered soldiers who were "out of the conflict," but Evens noted that the Iraqis were in fact still in Kuwait when he sent them to their maker, that they were driving away with Kuwaiti loot, and most importantly, the ceasefire deadline had not yet been met.

"Article 41.-Safeguard of an enemy hors de combat

A person who is recognized or who, in the circumstances, should be recognized to be hors de combat shall not be made the object of attack.

A person is hors de combat if:

He is in the power of an adverse Party

Oh great, so you can't kill him if he's a conscript. Well, that settles it, we broke the rules of war, but for the record, these rules are inherently stupid! Hold on, what does 'adverse' mean? Well, I think I get it, but that's kind of ambiguous. Why not say 'opposing party?' "

Moreover, Clark maintained that use of incendiary weapons violated international law.

"For the purpose of this protocol:

Incendiary weapon means any weapon or munition which is primarily designed to set fire to objects or to cause burn injury (sic) to persons through the action of flame, heat, or a combination thereof, produced by a chemical reaction of a substance delivered on the target."

First of all, because that ruling, if followed strictly, would ban all explosives except those not created through a chemical process; nuclear weapons. C'mon, that would be insanity. So an exemption would be written in.

" *Munitions* designed to combine penetration, blast or fragmentation effects with an additional incendiary effect, such as armor-piercing projectiles, fragmentation shells, explosive bombs and similar combined-effects munitions in which the incendiary effect is not specifically designed to cause burn injury to persons, but to be used against military objectives, such as armored vehicles, aircraft and installations or facilities."

Well, that exemption allows for just about anything but napalm and Molotovs, and

no Super Cobras carried those that day. Still, Clark pushed that 'war crime' for the entire decade, or as Viscount would say: 'the whole decade of ten years.' One last observation on the exemption should be made; it's just one super stringy sentence. Who wrote that?

"Ramsey Clark can move to Hell," Evens observed, overheard by Ricci.

"What, Wesley Clarke can go to Hell?"

Evens chuckled.

"No, the General has no doubt hedged his bet with all the popular deities."

"Right. This about Gulf One?"

"Yeah, that's a war story I'll tell you in camp sometime." A few clicks out of the way of the Ma'dan village, a small sapper crew arranges a daisy chain improvised explosive device (IED). The team is only an eight-man section, but smaller groups had been known to pull off spectacular attacks.

Their informant makes clear the convoy will be considerably more up-armored than the usual lorries coming through, but stressed how imperative the Sword team's destruction was.

The Sergeant in charge cased the area for a low flood area, where a drainage pipe would run under the road. A thorough probing turned it up.

"Wheel the really big stuff over here," he'd demanded, kneeling at one mouth of the pipe, "I think it will fit the siege artillery rounds. Try to fit them through. Steady she goes."

He referred to Russia's Kondensator 406mm gun, which wasn't really a siege weapon, but an early Nuke delivery gun. The scuttlebutt behind its appearance in Iraq is that Saddam once bought one for Gerald Bull to play with.

“Okay, lay out the rest on this side of the hill,” said the Sarge, referring to the shallowest incline south of the ditch.

The men set a row of Egyptian rocket warheads, small Sakr-18 artillery explosives. Then they proceeded to cobble these separate bombs into an integrated trap known as the daisy chain. To link the various bombs, you just need to tie stereo speaker wire to all the explosives. That way, you only need a single radio detonator to trigger your boom device.

Okay, so the sappers are using their golden bb, the 406. This is a special occasion that calls for a special standoff detonator. A set of two-way radios will do the trick.

Place one on the bomb, and keep one handy. Here goes. The Forty APC returned later than expected, for those fish needed bagged a second time. Everyone complained loudly, but Ricci was adamant about keeping the vehicle buttoned up on the return home. Something didn't feel right. Southern Iraq hadn't experienced many attacks so far, but talk concerning a young silver-spooned cleric had sharpened over time. It seemed his militia had received special training in the east, and the radical was planning violence against Coalition interests.

IEDs have so far been the greatest danger to patrolling personnel, so Sword vehicles roved with a radio broadcast countermeasure. A small box on the Forty broadcasted a symphony of random radio transmissions along all the known bands employed by attackers, and extrapolated many unused signals, hoping to preempt any detonators.

Ideally, the measures will cause premature detonations while the bombs are still in the enemy's possession.

Maybe soon, UpLink will have models combing the country within a UAV's payload package, but right now, the countermeasures travel with the troops.

Minutes Later

“Nigel, halt!”

The car braked atop a shallow hill. Below, a pale column of smoke billowed from a gigantic crater. The northern wind prodded it against the filtration system.

“I see a body,” voiced the monotone of Evens, pointing from starboard. It lay prone on its back, hands blown skyward in surrender, “and the bridge is out. I think we foiled an ambush.”

“Yeah, well, no use in dwelling on it. See if we can still reach the village.”

“Aye.”

‘The study shows us more clearly than ever that higher costs don’t necessarily mean higher quality. Medicare is spending 30 percent more than it needs to be. Even at these high costs, there are major gaps in health-care quality and safety.’

—Dr. Mark McClellan, administrator of the federal Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services

“I wasn’t born Mikhail Ruzhyo, I pinned it on myself, through dedication to my craft. I grew up within the district of Groznensky in the 1980s, before any war for independence. Talk within the clusters of youth circulated around rock music and Afghanistan. Most of the boys wanted to rock like the bands coming out of Sweden, America, and the UK, and all the boys had interest in fighting in Afghanistan, though none of us really cared about the ideologies involved. You can guess the lot of us really didn’t mind which side we fought for, though you can count on many saying they’d prefer fighting as Soviets, because the arsenal of communism had the fighters. It didn’t matter what the flyboys flew, really, but some could talk for what passed for hours about the Grach (Rook), called the FROGFOOT by NATO, and how it could prey on the Mujahadeen below.

Indeed, sometime after the war ended, I learned no Frogfoot pilot ever died in the

entire war. The Americans could think of the plane as one of their own Warthogs on crack, but I digress.

I also wanted to fight.”

The Russian clicked the stop button on his tape recorder, set it on the lavatory counter. He didn't wish to speak about the rest just yet. He sat atop the bathtub ledge, and scrubbed away his Saudi tan.

His hair was once again very close to his scalp. His skin progressively appeared more Russian the longer he scrubbed. His body was cut as slim as ever.

“I'm going to say goodbye to my wife, but then I'll return,” he announced. The empty room had nothing to say. The World Health Organization typically ranks France and Italy as the best providers of healthcare, and when gauged by certain preventive wellness and cost-effectiveness standards, the WHO is correct, but when you have a hefty wad of cash, and the immediate need for groundbreaking intensive care, the USA may have better hospitals to visit.

Anna lounged under the care of such an Intensive Care Unit, in a hospital along the Potomac, a hospital chosen by Victor as the most suitable in the world.

Mikhail is coming to visit. Incidentally, fewer acts of violence will occur in the middle-east, for sure. It is February 2004.

Author's Note: I was going to write one, because something in here could be misunderstood. Anyway, the countermeasure for IEDs was envisioned by Michael A. Stackpole, not me, and the name of the chapter means *the year of the sword*. The name comes from the name for the genocide. The legal documents cited in the chapter actually come from the Geneva Convention, and many of the events mentioned in this chapter really did occur. While much of this is a work of fiction, the real world provides a detailed backdrop for the story.

Chapter 11

Concrete Proof

‘When President Reagan asked me to be a Middle East envoy, right after the 241 Marines were killed in Beirut, Lebanon, I went over there, and George Shultz was the secretary of State, and he sent me over there. The truck went into that Marine barracks and killed 241 Americans. The next week, month, and year these barricades were put all around buildings these little concrete things. You’ve seen them; there are some out here. So then they started lobbing rocket- propelled grenades over them. So the next thing, you go down to the Corniche in Beirut, and here was the building, the British Embassy, with a metal mesh all the way around it so it drove off these rocket-propelled grenades; when they’d hit the mesh, it would bounce off. So what did the terrorists do? They go to school on you. They started hitting people going to and from work. So, you can’t I do not believe I’m convinced President Bush is right. I am convinced that the way to deal with this terrorist problem is to go after them where they are and not think that we can simply hunker down here and defend against every one of those attacks.’ –Donald Rumsfeld, United States Secretary of Defense

‘Being defeated is often a temporary condition. Giving up is what makes it permanent.’
–Marilyn vos Savant

Iraq

FROM above they looked like a Tonka set in a sandbox, but the earthmoving tools did real macro-level work on the salt-encrusted dead sand of one giant secluded dried marshland in Southeast Iraq. Armored bulldozers, shipped around the Arabian Peninsula from Israel, shoved the useless brittle sand into a neat berm, where a neat sandbagger allocated the salty dregs into discarded shopping bags from Kuwait.

Poor Palestinian Christians from Nablus and Bethlehem, cleared by the Israeli government, worked side-by-side with Jordanian Palestinians in hefting these low-grade sandbags atop pallets, so a forklift could saddle them inside a truck driven by a driver from Alabama.

These diverse groups all worked as subcontractors for UpLink’s security arm, Sword, in constructing a paramilitary facility dubbed Camp William Eaton. Together, they scooped away the salty sand deemed useless by the security-consulting firm hired by Roger Gordian. The engineering consultant had been forthright:

“Salt is hygroscopic, meaning it attracts water, meaning it pulls in water that can expand and contract, driving a large morphing wedge within the matrix. Also, if you’re using rebar in the mix, and you probably will, the saline solution will corrode the steel. So, unless you want to soften this up for your enemy sappers, you best get yourself some better sand. You can import it, and you can cultivate some better sand, by going under the post-Gulf War strata.”

So Roger’s team put their claws in the sand, and swept under the carpet. The

layer that had collected since Saddam's irrigation ploy suddenly gave way to American ingenuity.

"Hold, halt it! We've got another mass grave over here!"

Richard Thibodeau, better known as Rollie, supervised the construction effort at Camp William Eaton. His jerking movements cocked his hardhat over his eyes, quickly rectified, after stopping the dozer's rampage.

He stubbed one finger at a crowd of loitering Palestinians, reciting from a phrasebook that he needed a stretcher team in the ground.

"Merde! What kind of garden did he expect to grow?" Thibodeau moseyed to a silver air-conditioned trailer, swearing over another long day of monotony mixed with the macabre. He loafed on a tacky lawn-chair behind the screen door, and considered taking a lemonade from the cooler. Why not?

Tiredly, he pivoted his creaky frame, scratched an area chafed by a long shift of inspection tours, and slid the cold lid.

"Awe!"

Serpents! Jumping from within! Fear slackened his knees, and the floor interrupted the falling process.

"Ricci! You good-for-nothing New England Wop! I'll beat on your Wise-end Italian butt!"

In the bedroom of the neighboring trailer, Tom Ricci's chiseled Italian face cut a prankster's grin. The trucks dumped the low-end sandbags on different sides of the perimeter at dusk, so Marsh Arabs could stack them against trenches, pits, unearthed pipes and the like, in preparation for better defenses in the future. The work took place inside a wide place cordoned off by dozed sand berms, which in turn were cordoned off

by razor-wire, ergo barbed wire beyond that, and wide tank ditches beyond that, and buried sharpened spikes beyond that.

US Navy Seabees burrowed out the inner courts of firebases, sections dedicated to servicing howitzer batteries, but Sword had most of the work performed by the otherwise permanently unemployed of the Arab World. UpLink, in fact, didn't have a high percentage of skilled personnel on site in the month of February, just a few at work erecting the fifty-foot observation towers for the classified automated sentry guns. Peter Nimec supervised from a distance, leaving his two surrogates, Thibodeau and Ricci, to overlook things in his place. Nimec considered the joint patrols with the Ma'dan more pressing to his time, although his subordinates seemed better adjusted to handling the exercises.

He felt the team had connected well with the browbeaten Shiite community when he sat down to write his quarterly progress report at the end of February.

To: Megan Breen, Acting Chief Executive Officer

I know the month isn't quite over yet, but I feel the need to summarize the last few months at this time. First off, the Ma'dan are some of the best friends we could have found out here. They know Saddam screwed their lives more than we ever did, and several Sheikdoms have accepted first contact. We've taught them how to better collect water and food from the wastes, and everyone's performed really well on our joint patrols.

The construction site William Eaton has yet to be sabotaged by any of the laborers at this time, but we've successfully turned some intelligence sources caught planting surveillance devices. Surprise, they were Palestinians. Anyway, it's been a real coup, because the known list of surveillance suppliers is

easier to follow than Soviet Bloc weapons dealers. I think we're starting to figure out the nature of the Tangos out here.

Thanks for shipping out the detonator drone for battlefield testing. We're about to put it on a flight pattern, to see what it can dig up.

About morale: pretty good. The guys especially liked the 'faith-based' mission of supplying that movie to the Assyrians in the North. The guys also enjoy building a well-located base for our hub-and-spoke logistics dispersal. They're amazed by some of the clever engineering schemes we've got running, and some of our allies are visiting to take pointers.

On a personal note: I feel Gord's going to have this region connected to investors pretty soon. Violent attacks have seriously dropped this month, especially in our sector. Where attacks are occurring, the Fortiori APC outguns them all the way. We haven't yet had occasion to fire the XM8 carbine in anger, and some of the guys have complained to Ricci about that. Still, we can't seem to keep pipe and power lines up around here, and we've been attacked regularly when repairing them. Thankfully, the open ground serves us well, allowing us to subdue them before really taking fire.

Give the stockholders a high outlook in the next quarter, will you? Things are looking up.

Sincerely, Peter Nimec, Sword Officer

In the dawn hours before the department expected him for work, Hakim Abad indulged in his secret passion of painting nudes. He'd mimicked pictures from western magazines in the past, but on this February morning, he'd asked his wife to pose for him in his garage workshop.

He mixed the different pigments together, working closer to the ideal shade. This was their first session, so her bashful expression was refreshingly genuine. He'd assured her incessantly that no one could peek in, not even the American helicopters with the starlight scopes fixed at them.

At last, he had what he wanted, and resumed brushing the canvas. *She's coming alive in paint.* He compared the work of his wife, and the 2-D avatar, smiled at both.

He should have asked her to do this years ago. *Who's going to storm in?*

The garage door retracted, his lady groped for her gown.

"Who's there?"

His wife scrambled away, he clutched a handy board, but no one answered his query.

The door's never done that before!

Paul Evens banked the controls from one residential area to another, mindful to keep the UAV's electronic footprint over a widely diverse area. He ran through the full spectrum used in terrorist improvised explosives. The box currently ran through some of those detonated at shorter ranges...

Khadijah Abbas enjoyed company. She'd lived alone, as widows are expected too, but since the American occupation, she's begun inviting more visitors than usual. She spent her days patiently reading western literature, in hopes she could better relate to her distant son when he returned from school in Michigan. He's studied diesel engineering, in hopes the country would again demand the skill. He promised to return after the semester, but when do those end?

The doorbell! Maybe class is over!

She clutched the door.

"Hello?"

Nobody.

That's odd, it never rings itself.

Mamoud Asad had never seen the likes of a Super Bowl before, but liked seeing the rough game they played. The team in blue looked better than the white-and-green team, and Mamoud wished to see them rough up those cats some more, after this halftime distraction ends.

The show was loud and proud, the worst of the American culture. He couldn't quite decipher what the white boy and black woman were singing about, but it sounded as lewd as the pair looked. Good, it seemed to come to an end. The music stopped, and the boy is reaching over...

"Huh? The TV shut off!"

The remote sat in his lap. He clicked the power button, and resumed watching. Surely, he didn't miss anything.

"The guy that once performed with Cheb Mami was much better, and so was the girl with the exposed midriff."

One second didn't change anything. The show was awful. More football!

The box had moved through the infrared band, used by most television remotes, as Evens piloted through another neighborhood. It probably exited a few sets, but was worth the potential of exploding some mines.

Rashid Mohammed lived in a home of demanding kids. They knew he was wealthy, somehow, and always begged for the flashiest toys. *Now it's remote controlled vehicles. They always want more! What happens to the old ones? Who knows?*

He grumbled over the bills coming in from around the world. Toys cost too much.

Look at that! Am I keeping Tycho RC up all by myself!

He absently thumbed through a colorful toy catalogue in the long hall of his home, when one of the cars wheeled under his lead foot.

Evens hoped his sweeping didn't harm any innocents, but pressed the thought to the back of his thoughts. *If some harm comes to some good people, it's ultimately the fault of bomb-makers...*

"Help, I've fallen and I can't get up!"

After a minute of lying on the cold hardwood floor, Rashid came to realize the car had somehow initiated without any help. He was alone. Well, surely someone will arrive to rescue him later in the day. *InshAllah. Just wait on the floor.*

Abu Massin slept peacefully in a secret labyrinth far below the grounds of a Nassaryia mosque, after a long marathon shift of crafting bombs for the coming uprising.

All the IEDs are ready for the fates of infidels; it's only a matter of dispersing the bombs among the mujahadin.

His sleep forewarned of troubles, but his thinking mind dismissed the visions. *Every Jihad comes with burdens, and martyrs will be necessary for Allah's will, but these good men will vanquish the infidel, InshAllah.*

Most pilots would feel apprehension about putting a mosque within the detonator's footprint, but Evens rationalized that he had no orders to avoid painting specific buildings with electronic emissions. Besides, he's supposed to destroy the combatants.

He ran the full spectrum orchestra over it, keeping his optical attention open for any flashes.

Aha! A plume of sand!

Chapter 12

Cutting the Red Tape Knot

‘In the general course of human nature, a power over a man’s subsistence amounts to a power over his will.’ –Alexander Hamilton

‘Underlying most arguments against the free market is a lack of belief in freedom itself.’
–Milton Friedman

‘Distance does not decide who is your brother and who is not. The church is going to have to become the conscience of the free market if it’s to have any meaning in this world - and stop being its apologist.’ –Bono

Okay, one more quote:

‘After four years at the United Nations I sometimes yearn for the peace and tranquility of a political convention.’ –Adlai Stevenson, Diplomat to the UN during the Cuban Missile Crisis

Macao

Roger Gordian knew Machiavelli well, knew his history, his major work, and most importantly, how to sum it up. The author of *The Prince* died without power, in complete exile, with no influential friends. This man, Gordian concluded, seemed more a snobby charlatan than a true expert at anything.

The renegade businessman started up his firm with some principles running contrary to Machiavellian ideas. Concerning auxiliaries, often called ‘mercenaries,’ Gordian believed they’d suit him well. Concerning low intensity conflict, again, Gordian believed these were worth undertaking. His ideas didn’t mesh with the renaissance Italian’s, but still, he may have had something.

Niccolo Machiavelli did recognize that a leader should oversee a subjugated people from up close, allow them their local customs and beliefs, and generally leave them alone. But he didn’t invent these concepts, Alexander did. He led sixty thousand Greeks into Mesopotamia and Hellenized the known world. He was the true model for conquest.

He demonstrated that this region could be ruled by an external power long-term, and that the people of this region could be taught to like Western ways. Mesopotamians had been Greek once, and they could be American, too. What’s so bad about the American lifestyle, anyway? The government doesn’t sanction the book-burnings, after all. These people will go for it, if central control is slackened.

Gord pondered all these things a few moments before commencing a gravelling session to a crowd in Macao, an island in the stable Pacific Rim.

“I extend my warm thanks to my collaborators in this conference. You’ve all done a wonderful job bringing a very diverse set of interests together, and it’s a privilege to discuss a number of important issues with all of you.”

He collected a beat of breathing space, and moved to the body of the letter.

“A friend recently told me of a story about a single mother from Baltimore, Maryland. This woman, young for a mother, lived in the low budget projects, a neighborhood with little day-to-day interest to involved capitalists like ourselves, but she valued her community, house, and children.

Well, she worked a little during school hours, then came home every evening before school was out, to keep her kids from trouble. But trouble lived in that neighborhood, and while she kept her home as neat and secure as one woman could, pushers ran shop on the curb. Well, she didn’t like it, and informed the police, and the officers would come by in cruisers and flash the lights a few times, and the pushers would vacate for a while.

You all know this story. All of us have stayed in plush hotels long enough to flip on the televisions and tune in to a cop program. You see the thugs, you see a complaint, you see the patrol drive by, but there’s always a following episode. Why is that? How do the villains return episode after episode? I should remind all of you, Cops is a reality program that’s been running consistently since 1989, and some of the scripted shows are based on the dossiers from real precincts.

Let me tell you, community policing is hard work. We give officers fast cars and the flashers to circumvent traffic, but we still have high crime districts, effectively in control of pushers very much like the ones based in the Baltimore woman’s street.

I’ll tell you a few things. Organized perps look for vacant lots, boarded windows, peeling paint, all that decay, for some reason. Perhaps, I’ve been grasping this theory, perhaps, they’re fighting us in a very definite asymmetric way.

Conventionally, our armed forces hold onto the high ground, tenable locations, for

their own survival, and strategically important locations, because guys like us can mold these things into something useful to our civilization. We put our people where they can survive, and where our industry can prosper. This is smart strategic-thinking maneuver warfare. Our enemies can't compete in this way. At the turn of the twentieth century, there was a baseball player with a higher batting average than anybody else. He just had this way of getting on base all the time. When asked what his secret was, he replied, 'you hit it where they ain't.'

Apparently, we 'ain't' where the perps are, not often enough, and the reason seems to be economic. We don't protect low rent areas, places where businesses aren't viable. We have zones full of crime and violence. In, say, Europe or America, where political affiliations distribute revenue to their pet special interests, crime is going to fluctuate in the regions where the losing interests live."

Roger clicks a power point map. The famous red/blue county map appears.

"The results of the US of A's 2000 election, county-by-county, as compares to the FBI's compiled criminal statistics map. In the following years, the victor's counties become safer, and the loser's counties become more dangerous. That says something else about pork barreling in the US, but for my purposes, it also says our reallocating of capital also reallocates crime. In this war, we've internally had winners."

Now a map of Iraq, divided up into different interests. "In the center, losers, here, where Christians live, apprehensive winners, in the south, people with little to lose, and plenty to gain, and in the North, a people with a degree of autonomy in the last twelve years, but nationhood to gain. The Kurds are broken in factions as well. You have a communist democratic party that has less reason to like us businessmen, and the free market democratic party. Both embrace 'freedom,' which makes Washington happy, but

they embrace differing visions of what ‘freedom’ is. The outcome of things up north won’t necessarily end in a zero-sum situation, but they see industry differently, and in my country, you touch social security, the other side kills you.”

He breaks during some brief laughter, sips some Evian by the podium, and jumps back in.

“Let’s review the key points again.

1. Government forces are going to jealously guard the important stuff
2. In turn, the perps are going to seize the vulnerable slums
3. The losers are to become roomies with the perps.

I knew the rules a long time ago; that’s why I dedicated UpLink to connecting the Third World into the global market years ago. You guys watched me base satellite relay stations and fiber optic cable hubs in certain impoverished nations over the years, and thought I was nuts, but I knew what I was doing.

It all occurred to me years ago as a captive, around the time Ho Chi Minh became a good communist; I watched my captives, wondered exactly what separated them from my own military. A code of laws? Communist literature is full of rules. I knew it wasn’t firepower, or brains, or anything else that basic.

I figured it out later when I came home, and picked up a phone for the first time. Somebody was playing a . . . Crosby Stills and Nash record about a shooting in Ohio.

I think I figured it out. We need unimpeded information flows, trade of goods, and the protection to perform both. We all learned this in business school, but we never listened to the printed word of an eighteenth century Scot.

Gentlemen, I don't blame any of you for protecting your stashes in Iraq, and I don't blame the governments for doing it, either, but we need to forge a cooperative venture to take the dry countryside and slums from the enemy.

What we need is cheap backbone in these regions, an international force of peacekeepers like the UN Teal Berets, the hired out infantry of nations willing to dispatch forces for as little as \$1,200 a month.

Now, the United Nations won't come to a resolution to do this for a long time, so we need a brand new ultra-national organization under the same MO, the United Corporations."

Applause broke out sporadically. These guys weren't enthusiastic about more expenses, but appreciated the grand vision of Gordian's plan. A moderating speaker took the stage.

"These guys aren't enthusiastic about more expenses, but we sure appreciate the grand vision of your plan, Mr. Gordian."

He introduced a new speaker, and Roger fled the stage, into his entourage, consisting of his Sword personnel recently relieved from the Iraqi theater.

Ricci had kept an anxious expression all evening, a condition set on by his ongoing distrust of Rollie.

"Pete, I don't know how to order a drink," he'd said, as the entourage shifted to the right corner of the hall. Tom leaned against the Taiwanese-catered bar, near enough to Pete to carry a whisper over.

His voice became a little raspy as he made a request.

"Could you please order a beer?"

Pete nodded.

“Certainly,” he spent a moment collecting various words together, then committed.

“Nee yio may-yio bing pee-jiou?”

Ricci intruded.

“Did I just hear you order pee juice?”

“I think I asked for a cold beer,” replied Nimec, “you see, the barmaid is using the beer tap!”

Ricci gladly accepted a full mug, and congratulated his buddy.

“Good work, but I thought you only learned survival Mandarin.”

Nimec laughed.

“In the quarters my old man and I walked in, beer is equated with survival- plus I’m a Firefly nut.”

With some alcohol in his system, the Italian-American visually relaxed.

“Hah. This security arrangement is a bit much, even for me, but I guess nobody wanted to take any chances.”

Indeed, Macao, a former Portuguese colony similar to Hong Kong, is far removed from the Moslem World. Nimec took in what his partner said, and kicked it around, speaking.

“We don’t truly have a place definitively out of their reach, but this is the best we could come up with. I suppose,” he mused, tumbling a wine glass in one hand, “Brazil would be a place to go. These guys would enjoy Rio. Eh, I just hope the bad guys didn’t intercept any of the mail from GordianKnot. Mo. . . Well, Gahn-bay!”

BOTTOMS UP

Eastern United States (Specifically, Baltimore)

‘In action be primitive; in foresight, a strategist.’ –Ed Koch, former mayor of New York City

“Vladimir, no, she’s passed on, I don’t want to linger in the hospital.”

Mikhail Ruzhyo stuffed his hands in the front pockets of his red sweater, and buried his down-turned head under the hood.

“Where are you, comrade?”

The Russian hesitated on the Transatlantic line.

“Dover, England. Okay, you don’t have to stay in the hospital, but please, don’t do anything rash. They fed her the anti-angiogenesis meds as I ordered, and their care was great. Pancreatic cancer just isn’t very treatable, what with the low response to Chemoradiation, even with the Gemcitabine. . . ”

Ruzhyo silenced him.

“Nyet, I don’t need the whole laundry list, I know they always try saving lives. I’m not upset at them, Vlad. I just want to return her home, then go back to work. Immediately.”

The Russian listened.

“So, where you going?”

“Right now? Just to get some rest before flying out. You’ll handle the arrangements?”

Ruzhyo rested the cellular phone a notch, noticing a pack of teens, all in team warm-ups, crowded around a recording video camera. All but the cameraman had fists clinched tightly within sweater pouches. A lanky white kid angled to Mikhail’s left flank.

The Chechen let his left eye trace him, and willed his muscles not to grow rigid.

Purple color flashed head-level. A fist preceded the purple blur. The youth impacted empty-handed against Ruzhyo’s hard cranium, precisely where the closed hand didn’t

want to land.

“Aiii!”

In a crescent motion Ruzhyo bats his unsheathed Shirasaya Wakizashi,¹ follows through the Raven fan’s jugular artery. He springs forward off the lead left foot, and sails for the camera, whipping the samurai blade from left to center.

“Yikes!”

The polymer casing and lens rain apart for the blade’s passage, and clatter underfoot. The sword swaths the Baltimore team logo. Another leap, hard right. A mugger casts a chain overhead, but Ruzhyo ducks low, sweeps at belly level. The grooved tip opens a bag of viscera. One body plunges to the concrete, and the guy at the Chechen’s face kneels.

The victor pivots, blade extended, to clear his surrounding space. The Wakizashi returns home to the sheath, secure in his sweater pouch. Mikhail, feeling secure, lifts his right hand to his ear.

“Hello, you still there? Good, come to think of it, I need to fly out right away. Can you arrange for my flight? To Germany? Wundervoll!”

Dover, England

“Wundervoll, indeed my friend,” Plenkanov absently read off his instructions, as his eyes wandered over the Cliffside long ago used as a jumping point for early aviators.

¹A Shirasaya is a thin block of wood with a hidden Japanese blade inside, and Wakizashi is a short blade a Samurai is allowed to carry in establishments that don’t allow them to take their Katana inside. Together, a Shirasaya Wakizashi is a dangerous concealed weapon, as seen in samurai films and manga.

Motivated by the incentives of prestige and a reward, scores of otherwise sane European males strapped on wings and committed faith in their contraptions. The first crossing wasn't from this side, however, for Louis Bleriot made the crossing from Calais.

Just as well, the British needed taken down a peg at the time, mused the Russian, but darn if the Americans wouldn't be counted out, sending the first woman over.

"I'll see you soon," he disconnected, and corked his iPod In-Ear Headphones in his ears. Luciano Pavarotti's rich Italian tenor crooned luxuriantly at 80db. Time to get to work.

He settled his laptop in place, and entered his preferred world.

Suppose, he mused, I have an email account visually identical to Mr. Tom Ricci's of UpLink's roster, TomRicci@hotmail,² except I, being Russian, use the Cyrillic 'C.'

While musing, he registered such an address at MSN, all the while scheming to integrate the move into his larger plan.

"Mission complete, now to fit it into my other components," he muttered, pulling up the altered form of the Trojan horse he'd been modifying. When attaching a malicious file to an email, one must then attach an innocent file after that, so only the most innocent file extension can be seen. Most go with .JPG, but .PDF or .MPEG work just fine.

He didn't go for such shaky ploys, preferring to go with an HTML header file commonly attached to UpLink mail.

And finally, the last step, mailing it to MBreen@DSL.

²Author's note: currently, Hotmail doesn't offer Russian as an available language, and I wasn't able to get the registration to recognize Russia as my country, so this scheme isn't workable anymore. I'm not admitting to any illegal activity, but I test a lot of what I write about.

And with a flourish, he stood atop the grassy cliff, and lofted the physical evidence over the cliff. The laptop met the same fate as plenty of the early flyers.

Maryland

A slight detour, but the wet works agent belatedly realized he needed to find a clean retirement for the concealed weapon.

Step one, find an unattended carwash.

Somewhere near the beltway, he found one. Ruzhyo had the sword tied to the roof rack of his station wagon, so even if someone witnessed him washing the car, nothing would seem unusual. As it happened, an aged Vietnamese woman, owner/operator of the truck stop, happened to see him, and dismiss him just as quickly.

Step two, buy a few miscellaneous pieces of junk.

He u-turned to the parking lot, and briskly trotted inside, and pawed some of the junk souvenirs a Maryland truck stop has to offer.

“Excuse me, Miss?”

He could only see her bent over posterior, but she seemed busy.

“Patrick, you get the counter, okay?”

A young half-Vietnamese half-Caucasian boy manned the cash register. His eyes attentively appraised the LCD readout.

“Are you buying any gas?”

“Gas? Nyet, I’m just buying these items.”

The boy looked at the counter.

“Keychains, tobacco pipes, and a country compilation CD? You Russians are odd-balls!”

His mother, overhearing, shouted.

“Patrick, don’t insult the customers!”

“Sorry, mama!”

He added up the price.

“\$21.83,” he said flatly, sounding either shamed or dull.

Ruzhyo slapped down an Andrew Jackson and an Abraham Lincoln.

The boy saved the money, and shouted toward the lady.

“Mama, Uncle Jack is in!”

The boy handed out the proper change, and dismissed his customer.

“Sure, I don’t need a bag or anything,” muttered the Russian, as he turned into the tall dark-haired white guy behind him.

“Pardon me,” he said politely.

“No problem,” replied Mikhail.

He didn’t look back, he just vacated the scene, and lobbed the junk into the passenger seat, and reversed the vehicle.

Step three, park beside the sprawl that is an outdoor flea market, and peddle goods from the hatchback.

Mikhail found a large rutted area filled with rainwater beside a white-on-puke hail-beaten recreational vehicle. He bundled up the tacky items, and rested them on the tailgate.

One Shirasaya sword and later, he had his market, and one toothpick and nonchalant posture late, he had the proper flea market salesman look correct.

This sloppy appearance is more Grigory’s livelihood, he amusedly thought, idly picking away at teeth that didn’t need cleaning. He slouched for effect, watching every

variety of the species mingle and gawk at items no individual has a need for, until a pudgy teen or preteen boy of alabaster color focused in on exactly what Ruzhyo had leaning on his chest.

“Gawd! That’s one of the swords from Rouroni Kenshin! How much, how much?”

The Chechnya native made a spirited effort to stretch out a lazy southern drawl.

“Lemme figger. . . Awe, I’ll take a fiver fur th’ sword. Cheaper in Walmart, ahuh.”

The KGB had taught him to always say “cheaper than Walmart,” if he ever had the need to sell his weapon in the Southern United States. Supposedly, the phrase will sound native.

“Five bucks? Sure!”

The boy dug deep within the pockets of his oversized trousers, but after a time of wrangling, his pale hand surfaced with a wad of cash.

“Take care now, ya hear?!” “Ha! I am the Ronin Samurai, looking for love and gold! Ah!”

In the near-privacy of a wooded park several meters from an RV park, the kid bounced from a friend’s trampoline, striking overhead with his new Shirasaya. The blade dragged through the drenched sod upturned by his lead foot.

He held a striking pose as his stereo pumped out his anthem, Godsmack’s contribution to The Scorpion King. He let the ethereal instrumental bridge to wrap up, then made a show of pointing the Wakizashi toward heaven, then one more stylish striking pose, before slowly housing it away in the scabbard within his improvised sash.

Everybody’s going to feel so gay not being a swordsman like me, he thought.

As his favorite Creed song got underway, he practiced flicking the sword underhand with his wrists. He kept a stern look while he channeled fierceness and angst. His slashes

grew faster and more sure, until he felt confident enough to slash and sing simultaneously.

“Now I saw a face on the water
It looked humble but willing to fight
I saw the will of a warrior
His yoke is easy and His burden is light. . .”

The school bus let out the trailer park kids, so he climbed back atop the big trampoline.

“Hiya!” He fell facing a pack of girls, all toting oversized backpacks.

“I am a lonely ronin samurai, on a quest for love and gold!”

They barely glanced at him.

“You are so queer, it isn’t even funny,” then they walked on.

“Oh yeah? You’re the gay-wads!” In the middle of his outrage, someone shut off *Bullets* during the chorus.

“Look at me... look at me
At least look at me when you shoot a bullet through my head
Through my head
Through my head
Through my head”

Angrily, he swiveled around.

“That’s my music, fag-!”

Oops, cops.

“Yeah, we have a don’t ask, don’t tell policy in our department, so it wasn’t a nice idea to blurt my secret. I’m Detective Walther, this is Detective Morrison,” Morrison tipped her hat, “and we’re here over a complaint that someone’s been swinging a sword around the community.”

“Thing is, there’s actually more to the story. You see, we just answered a call about some people with sword wounds in the hospital parking lot, and we’re wondering if there’s some correlation,” said Morrison.

“I wouldn’t know anything about that,” evaded the kid, “I-I, I use my sword for peace.”

Walther leaned his elbows on the trampoline and sneered.

“Well that’s interesting, because I could have sworn I heard you say you fight for gold.”

The boy balled both fists.

“Are you a retard? That’s just my motto!”

“Ha, so your motto has no relation to reality? The kid’s a future politician, I can tell that!”

The kid looked ready to bolt.

“This is gay. I’m going inside.”

And he did bolt, an action aborted by Morrison’s talons.

“Hold on, we just want to take you to the department for a while. How can we contact, say, a parent or guardian?”

“You act less like a homo!”

Good grief.

“Alright, you can call them when we’re at the station. Come on.”

Chapter 13

Achtung

‘If everything seems under control, you’re just not going fast enough.’ –Mario Andretti.

Dover to Bitburg

Ruzhyo numbly boarded Vladimir’s little Piper Arrow in the South of England, after a restless transatlantic commercial flight from Baltimore to Montreal to London. As per their earlier arrangement, Vlad had no need for any help from the agent, so the Chechen slumped in the passenger seat, and closed his eyes.

He vaguely recalled Plenkanov radioing the Dover tower, but nodded off after hearing a few humdrum number-laced exchanges. The need of rest outweighed curiosity. It was no contest, really. Minutes over the Calais or somewhere, Ruzhyo didn’t care, his senses completely shutoff. The Russian briefly looked over at his passenger between checks at

the instrument panel. His Virgin radio station faded out over some WWI cemetery. Just as well, the sun will be up soon, and traffic will pick up.

He spotted the dawn patrol from Spangdahlem, an F-16c pair on a racetrack pattern in Southwest Germany. Their collision lights blinked at him, just so he'd know they were watching. The leader told him they were of the 52nd Fighter Wing, and cautioned him to mind his course. No problem. Plenkanov couldn't help playing up his Russian accent on this occasion.

"Tower, am I clear for landing at the BITBURG runway? Oh," he feigned to realize, "That's a United States Air Force base, no? I'd better scatter from restricted airspace!"

The combat pilot irritably corrected him.

"Negative, flight, Bitburg is your destination."

Vladimir tried conveying his smile across the radio.

"Da, this the former home of your great superpower's mightiest fighter squadron, no? Yet here I am, a Russian aviator, ending a joyride at this airbase. Tell me, who won the Cold War?"

"This is tower, flight. The pattern is clear, you are clear to land," the tower gave him a heading and a strip.

"Acknowledged. I'm putting her down."

Bitburg

Few people and few activities are present these days at Bitburg, not since the 1994 closure. In fact, Plenkanov can't really find many light sources as he and Ruzhyo exit a small flight hangar, and stroll to the ancient staff parking lot. No chauffeurs lounge by the car provided one day before by one of the major continental rental agencies.

Ruzyho naps again after finishing his shuffle to the car. That's fine. Plenkanov exits on Autobahn A-48 toward a little storage rental unit in the base's decaying little host hamlet. Two vicious Rottweilers lunge at the ends of chains behind a fence to the side. The Russian ignores them, and digs out the storage key. He flashes his mini LED flashlight, matching the numbers to his number. At last, not too soon, they're in synchronicity. He works the padlock, and eases the chain clear, then pushes in a slant.

He found the switch and flicked it. Inside was a securely locked gun cabinet. He rotated the dial a few combinations, and removed the twin contents; two lacquered Saiga 12-gauge shotguns with 580mm barrels and folding butt stocks.

"Mikhail, tote the spare magazines and shells out," he called, low enough that no one would hear, over the Rottweiler banshees. The Chechen rubbed both eyes.

"Sure, I'm coming."

Then they resumed running down A-48 at all possible Porsche Carrera GT might. They held course until the car reached the exit at Trier, and Plenkanov shifted again. On the right turn on B-50, they found a McDonalds drive-through.

Crappy intercom: "Welcome to McDonalds, may I take your order?"

"Two coffees, please."

"Would you like fries with that?"

"No, thanks."

The burger-flipper named a price, and cut the com.

They took the steaming Styrofoam cups, exchanged a Euro or so, cradled them in cup-holders, revved the ten cylinder up high, and found the next AUSFAHRT (exit, not a special place to release flatulence, as some newbie Americans believe).

Under an hour later, they found themselves on Autobahn 6, very near Kaiser-

slautern's Rod and Gun Club.

There's a clearing, an inlet in the woods, where Poliz cars sometimes mask from traffic. Vladimir detours between the ledges of vegetation. He set the parking brake, and glanced at his brooding friend.

"Mikhail?"

The agent lifted his Saiga by the bulging magazine.

"Let's proceed."

He wiped a sweat cluster from his nose, then brushed the back of his hand against his pants. He popped the lid off his coffee cup and downed the last of it.

"Okay."

They both exited, but didn't lock the doors. Mikhail the Rifle fixed some tinted Raybans on his face, and produced a pair of earplugs from his front left pocket.

Sol crested over an unseen hill in the East. It could be in a very inconvenient place when they're ready.

Vladimir pored over a map and compass. He didn't trust civilian GPS so close to K-Town, the living space of 34,000 Americans attached to Ramstein.

"Follow me, Mikhail," said he, a little dubiously, "according to my observations of some overheads the other day, the best hunting grounds should be this way."

A few paces into the trek, they met a barbed wire fence. Plenkhanov offered his buddy the shotgun, and negotiated over, taking a low-hanging beech branch, set one hiked-up foot on the top wire, and dropped to the other side. Ruzhyo returned the shotgun, adding his own, and leaped clearly over.

"Olympians," the computer tech muttered, as he returned the second Saiga. He marched on, now holding the piece in a more operational manner.

“We only have a few clicks to go.” Another check at the map and compass. He wasn’t confident at orienteering.

At one point, he visually relaxed. A hundred or so meters was a landmark recognized from his overhead studies. It was a Christmas’ cedar marred by a revolting shearing dished out by a T-6 pilot with no idea how to prune.

“There’s no mistake now.”

He doubled the pace, quickly matched by Ruzhyo. Voices, in English, American English. They fell, froze.

“Hey, was that a hare?” One voice called out.

“Well, don’t scare it, Brice!” A party of hunters. Ruzhyo duck-walked close to his partner.

“Comrade, don’t freeze up. I need you to crawl forward, hands and knees, until they are in your sights, yeah? I’m swinging left,” he patted Vladimir’s back, and broke into a sprint.

The Russian closed both eyes, choked his stomach back down, and moved one elbow before the other.

Vladimir could no longer see the Chechen when the distant Saiga let down a fusillade of buckshot and Magnum shells. *MOVE FASTER!* Both Saigas had the tested sheet metal ten-round clips. Ruzhyo had his emptied nearly as fast as a semiautomatic allowed. Hurry.

Vladimir crested the hill, and peered down. A hunter in lodencloth (hunter’s clothing) lay prone beneath a stump, bleeding but fighting. He had a .300 rifle pointed at Ruzhyo’s treeline, snapping back the bolt. Vlad preempted him, streaming 00 scattershot across the jaeger’s (lead hunter) green back.

“I’m hit!” He feebly rolled closer to the hill, leaving a thick red trail. Vlad’s eyes followed him, sighted, fired again, once more, another time. The gun clicked empty.

A tap on the shoulder.

“Back to the car, go!” Ruzhyo, looking agitated.

“I don’t like these heavy gauge guns, even if they look like the AK.” Mikhail had the wheel, (lucky dog), and it was Vladimir who slumped in the passenger seat.

The assassin had the presence of mind to comb the glove compartment for their hunting license (Jagdschein). They were visible. Anyway, in hunting accidents, the police are always to treat the scene as a terrible accident, no reason to harass people over that, right? The roads won’t be cordoned. In all the years terrorism has targeted American servicemen in Germany, men have been shot, bombed, kidnapped, and even axed, in the cities, but no Libyan or Bader-Meinhof rogues ever encountered soldiers in the woodlands.

After less than five kilometers on Autobahn 6, he turned onto Autobahn 62, gunned the engine a couple of minutes, then pulled over to the Hochwald Gas Station.

“Keep a lookout, while I pump some premium gas.”

“Certainly.”

Ruzhyo must have been inside, paying with Euros, because when he returned, he said, “the television isn’t streaming an image from a police helicopter, so we’re clear.”

He jumped in, hit the gas and listened to the engine’s rrrrvvvv.

Man, I’ll always love that sound.’

“We’ll see if they’re on the radio.” He pressed play.

“Ah crud, *99 Red Balloons*.”

He slanted into traffic. He accelerated to a ‘T’ intersection, took a left, then raced

back to Bitburg.

“I hope you can start that plane fast- we need to break out of the coming dragnet.”

Vladimir grunted.

“So why was this...slaying, necessary, Comrade?”

The tech checked the mirror.

“Strategically, it won’t do much good. Those hunters were probably medical and logistical personnel. As a morale tool, it’s a coup. For years, when these paramilitary groups went into a military engagement, even with numerical and tactical advantages, they always came out losing. Heck, when they did win, it was in the form of a hit, a murder, within cities, often when their opponents were unarmed. We entered those woods, however, outnumbered by that hunting party. We had semiautomatic shotguns, and they were similarly armed. We engaged that way, and routed them. That will be huge, but really, I just wanted to evaluate you firsthand. Mikhail, after our stop in Chechnya, are you still going to be my soldier?”

Acknowledgement: Minor car and coffee work by Viscount.

Chapter 14

Casus Belli

‘Tape a pencil flashlight with a very narrow beam to the barrel, exactly in line with it, and rig it so that you can comfortably turn the beam on for an instant with thumb or finger. Then stand in a room in the dusk, turn and fire, spin and fire, fall and fire, at the lamp, the corner of the picture, the book on the table, a magazine on the floor. Point naturally as if pointing the forefinger, arm in a comfortable position, never bringing it up to the eye to aim. An hour of practice can develop an astonishing accuracy.’ –Travis McGee, in *The Scarlet Ruse*

‘If you give a mouse a cookie, he’s going to want a glass of milk, then he’ll request a straw, Sic ad nauseam. So, does everyone understand why we can’t negotiate?’

Casus belli. Cause of war.— *Sic ad nauseam:* And so on to the point of nausea

IT is April of 2004, and fighting has livened up in the North. Roger Gordian has taken up residence within Camp William Eaton, and Sword's general area is completely clean of violence. Besides, in the Sunni North, the only remaining non-foreign threat is the single rebel cleric and his Mahdi Army, bankrolled and trained by Iran's Revolutionary Guard.

"Sir, Yes Sir!"

According to the doctrine of the enemy, now that practically none of their direct attacks are succeeding in any measurable way, they'll fight even more asymmetrically, taking hostages, assassinating mayors, executing captured friendly militiamen, et cetera, ad nauseam.

And to beat them, mused UpLink's founder, we must act less reactive and passive to these inevitable events.

"Listen up, my friends. We don't yet have all the international support we've asked for," the crowd in the mess shouted a mixture of oaths, "but through a long series of negotiations, I've managed to convince a few treaty nations of the clear and present need to temporarily relocate the international anti terrorist taskforce, RAINBOW SIX, from the United Kingdom, to here."

The attentive crowd stoically remained still. Rainbow hasn't yet been officially recognized to exist by any government, but when asked by the press, members of participating governments haven't denied the group's existence, either.

"The team will be restricted to members from governments taking part in OPERATION IRAQI FREEDOM, specifically meaning team members from Germany, Canada, Russia, and now Spain, will not attend this posting. However, an axillary half of the team, including members of those states, will remain to conduct operations in Europe.

This IS the second offensive front in the worldwide war on terror! There will **BE** kidnappings, there will **BE** hostage-taking, and there will **BE** firefights right here, where we will **BE** returning fire right back at them. We are in the open desert. This is a free-fire zone. The civilian village is more than a klick away, so the rules of engagement are eased enough for us to return fire at encroaching targets in the distance. Some of you have big .50s, some of you have XM8s, and some of you have long rifles. The Al-Mahdi Army, Al Quada, or even the Revolutionary Guard can approach us, and think we're soft for being mere contractors. Shoot them!"

The men listened, and understood. The restraints of Lawyer Infested Conflict weren't on them, so long as they were defending the base. They lent their applause.

"We aren't playing lawyer ball here," he brushed a rag across his moist forehead.

"You heard me, no lawyer ball. A firm just like ours has four of it's comrades hanging from a bridge right now. They were former SEALs, a fire team of men working security in the town of Falluja. They died in a roadside attack, and I told you where they are now.

Pundits on the news stations are babbling futile assertions that the clerics around here will shame their killers into never doing such things again. It's an election year in the US, so others- you know who they are- bring up the memories of Somalia, and are likening the perpetrators of this attack to the khat-chewing tribal fighters of that time, saying the United States government could pull the plug again-

He let the men vent disapproval, waiting the duration.

"We've performed smarter than any known non-national military force in the recorded times of this planet, and we're about to up the intelligence quotient of what it means to work in Sword. We've unraveled the Gordian Knot; now let's tie it around their necks!"

“HOO RAAH!”

“HOO YAAH! Remember, The SecDef and I couldn’t keep the embed reporters from coming in, not (sigh) ironically, after CBS showed those prison photos. But remember, operating procedure isn’t changing. Shoot, then we’ll lawyer you up.

“Hoo RAAH!”

“Dismissed!”

They fell back single file, Paul Evens leading the Marine Mickey Mouse March.

“Born in the woods, trained by a bear; Double set of dog-teeth, triple coat of hair.
M - Mean as hell A - All the time R - Rough and tough I - In the mud N - Never quit
E - Every day S - Semper Fi! “

From the short-lived FOX series, *Space: Above and Beyond*.

Outside

Lyrics adopted from *Full Metal Jacket*

Sargent Evens paraded them before film and lenses, stood them at attention.

“I don’t want no teenage queen.

I just want my M-16.

If I die in the combat zone.

Box me up and ship me home.

Pin my medals upon my chest.

Tell my mom I’ve done my best.”

They formed a line of khakis and load-bearing harnesses. Some wore dark shades that dehumanized them a degree, most glared ahead with naked eyes.

Evens maneuvered to face his men.

“Salute!”

“One ubi sol non lucet!” (Put it where the sun don’t shine!)

The TV journalist sauntered between the rolling camera and the contractors. His mike moved under his mouth, as he prepared to talk to the studio.

“That was the Sword contract workers of Sword’s Camp William Eaton, saying hello in their group’s way. Sword, of course, is the armed branch of Roger Gordian’s entity, UpLink. Soldier, how are you?”

The journalist, a veteran field reporter, one of the first notable Hispanic war reporters, extended a gloved hand to Evens.

“Would you like to introduce yourself to the world?”

The marine withdrew his hand.

“Not really.”

“Don’t be shy, go ahead!”

“OK. I’m Master Sergeant Paul Evens, retired, formerly of the United States Marine Corp 1st Expeditionary Force, Helicopter Aviation.”

“Semper Fi, Rock ‘n’ Roll! Who’s next?”

The news crew let several of the employees give testimonials about their jobs and lives, usually briefly, and with pointed questions. They didn’t seem overly concerned in pursuing comments contrary to the ‘army line,’ but that could change.

When the segment ended, the television’s viewer switched attention to the studio, where the pundits busily thought for the world. The host thought out loud about Evens.

“Isn’t it true that a helicopter pilot has to be an officer?”

In a beat, the pundit furthest from the host spoke up.

“Goodness, he said he was in helicopter aviation, he never claimed he was a pilot, Billy!”

The host halted him with both hands.

“True, my mistake. There’s a good chance he isn’t a pilot, or maybe he was busted in rank. My apologies. Now, what of the whole piece? Go ahead, free-associate, and let’s get to the truth. So what did you think?”

Outside the studio, in Iraq, the television news field crew moved forward with filming, talking, sometimes interacting, and monitoring their surroundings. One can never know what will make a good documentary, with the right editing, surprises, and compiled poll numbers.

Evens dismissed the men. Some chose to mingle outside, maybe get some face time before the camera. Everyone got a chance, fully knowing most of this footage would never see airtime on television. Despite that, most said *Hola* to someone, or someones. The lens was a focus, the center of the agora.

A tall tanned guy from Tempe, Arizona, performed a “Sammy Sosa” kiss for his mom when Roberto “Robin” Molina and Richard “Rollie” Thibodeau returned a fire team of Marsh Arabs from an expedition.

“Did we miss it?” Robin yelled from the behemoth APC. Rollie echoed him from up top, where he manned the Ma-Deuce.

“Yeah, but the TV crew says we’ll be back on in the hour’s last half,” replied Paul Evens, helpfully, “Thibodeau, what are you doing up there? We have the fancy Israeli system in there so you won’t get sniped.”

“Yeah, maybe we do,” he drawled, “but a fella my size needs out fur air.”

The camera crew hustled over, starved for a Pulitzer-worthy action shot.

“It’s a wonder we don’t see more Israeli soldiers with rock-sized wounds- with the aptitude of these guys with their slingshots,” remarked Molina, “they got a lot.”

ah huh, Evens nodded.

“So how bountiful was the catch?”

Molina shrugged boyishly.

“Dang, you couldn’t squirm, there are so many dead mice and snakes in there. Gross, man, I hope the water’s working, ’cause we’re crawling with desert fleas.” He walked off, looking for the latrine. Evens shouted at his back.

“No use letting their potential erode; I’ll put them on the grill right away.”

Abruptly, Robin turned back.

“Huh? Oh, I almost forgot. I put some snakes up to roast on the manifold. Those need taken out, before someone doing mechanic work gets spooked by them.”

“Or Thibodeau.”

“Or Thibodeau. Right, almost forgot. Later, Bro!”

“Alright. Be back before the end of the hour.”

A Little Later

“Here is a really special man on campus, the Tiny Terror, a fellow Hispanic, a former Special Forces Soldier. Tell everybody your name and rank, Soldier!”

The reporter exchanged the microphone from his black thermal gloves to the soldier’s hands.

“I’m Communications Sergeant Robin Molina. My last assignment was actually classified, but my last non-secret unit was within the 5th Special Forces Group. Is that good?”

“Very good. De Oppresso Liber. That was some impressive booty you brought in. Care to talk about it?”

Robin was a ham for the camera.

“OK, sure. They don’t call us snake-eaters for nothing. I went out woven in with a fire group of a friendly Arab militia, hunting mice and snakes from the open desert. The locals out here live within an ecological wasteland created by Saddam, so living can be pretty tough. Really, we can and do import a lot of stuff, but these people need a staple. Besides, if we give them everything except skills to do this alone, they only become dependent on us. We’ve taught them so much- much more than just how to shoot a gun. We’re really covering everything the cowering civilian weenies are supposed to, so we’re doing something of a double duty.

“They’re really getting an education with us, and they in turn are giving us some needed experience at this. We’re also getting to know and trust one another, which is more than the diplomats are doing. Really, they can identify with soldiers a lot better than weenies who wilt without air conditioning.

“Can I ask you a question?”

“I don’t know, can you? Just kidding, go ahead.”

“How is it that all the news that happens in a day can fit on a twenty-five minute news show?”

Iran

Plenkanov suffered tunnel vision that entire engagement, reflected Mikhail Ruzhyo, as he studiously lifted his body weight from some parallel bars inside a loft in the Southwestern town of Khorramshahr, a Petroleum exporting Town in southwestern Iran

with around 70,000 people on the west bank of the Karun River.

Man, he shot the same guy ten times, like some kind of rookie conscript peasant. He's been familiar with only computers for far too long.

His own weight offered no resistance to his firmly cut arms. He remained silent, deep into his workout, like a puritan at a barn-raising. His mind wandered wherever it pleased, and his eyes sealed to a 24 hour news station, prowling for regional news, and the Americans' take on events. Besides, *different day, same Shiite*, he thought.

That's how most of them are treating it now, though some of the boldest against the occupation are predicting civil war this month. If they weren't atheists, they'd print their prediction that the Mahdi (Islamic Messiah) would come to wipe out the capitalist warmongers.

Ruzhyo read the papers from time-to-time, when he felt nostalgic for the Soviet Union. He didn't see much difference in ideology, but then again, he didn't remember much about Soviet rule.

On the screen was the familiar veteran mustached reporter, after another Peabody, it seems. He had those same gloves he wore in Tora Bora, and has since picked up a matching jacket, and some red-tinted glasses.

So, first you cover Capone's empty vault, and now Saddam's? You must be welcomed as some sort of charm!

He ended the exhaustive workout, sat in a chair, and palmed his own talisman, a custom gift from Vladimir. It was a Strayer Voigt Infinity, chambered as small as they come, with the tiny OKO fiber optic sight. It was a heavy steel gun, built on the classic 1911 design, but with the finest twenty-first century performance.

Ruzhyo had practiced with it earlier, proving it's reliability at a hundred feet, and

placed one hundred out of one hundred shots within two inches of one another. And it never jammed. It was a fine target pistol, even though he had to cut it down to a length of four-and-a-half inches. He watched the news.

They passed the gate, sharing a traditional exchange with the checkpoint guards.

“Fac ut gaudeam! (Make my day)”

“Sit vis nobiscum! - (May the Force be with you)”

As they left the compound, the camera panned for a shot of the base’s banner:

“Numquam obliviscaris tua tela facta ab eis qui minima liciti sunt”

(Never forget your weapon is made by the lowest bidder)

Then back to the bumper sticker of the lead convoy vehicle:

“Si hoc legere scis nimium eruditionis habes, (if you can read this, you’re overeducated)”

“Sona si latine loqueris - (Honk if you speak Latin)”

“Quid quid latine dictum sit, altum videtur(Anything said in Latin sounds profound)”

“This terrain is practically featureless, but when I tell you to, stop filming. We’re going into a friendly village, and I don’t want our friends compromised,” said the man in the shotgun seat.

“No problem. I’ve dealt with gangsters, myself. I know the extreme danger these people are facing every day. They’re faced with threats of death everyday for collaborating with Coalition forces...”

That’s right, pour on the melodrama.

The commander prepped his soldiers, alerting them they’re in Indian Country.

“Men, we’re heading into danger. On three. One, two, three...”

They shouted together.

“Osculare pultem meam! (Kiss my grits!)”

Mikhail the Rifle felt tired enough to attempt sleep. He’ll need it, because the old team shows up in the morning. The team, that will mean Shooter, Hero, and the Snake. They’ll unite with the Rifle, and cast themselves over the border. Just as long as Vladimir has things together...

Unknown Location

Cyberspace is... A graphic representation of data abstracted from the banks of every computer in the human system. Unthinkable complexity. Lines of light ranged in the nonspace of the mind, clusters and constellations of data. Like city lights, receding... A consensual hallucination experienced daily by billions of legitimate operators, in every nation, by children being taught mathematical concepts... ’ –William Gibson

They’ve restructured overnight! Back in Dover, well, the physical location doesn’t matter much, command of Sword’s Iraq mission had been controlled by San Jose. It had specifically been in the oversight of one Megan Breen, the acting Chief Executive Officer, but over a weekend, that had changed. Reports are no longer regularly funneled to San Jose, California, they are now *walked* to the former CEO, the founder, Roger Gordian.

The hacker once again proves short of real power in a world that is still very real. Vladimir shouted at space. He vented at the air around his console, batting wildly, but grew tired, and surrendered back to his rational self.

A sensible means of salvaging this carefully laid plan must exist.

He probed the menu, found the personnel dossiers still outside the trash bin. So he

brushed up on the roster. *Do they have anybody to investigate- something too embarrassing for public consumption?*

Somewhere on the data tree branched a limb housing their personnel in Iraq. *Hmm, this Paul Evens guy's file is thicker than the others...*

Chapter 15

Legal Work

‘The history of the West, from the age of the Greek polis down to the present-day resistance to socialism, is essentially the history of the fight for liberty against the encroachments of the officeholders.’ –Ludwig von Mises

Noise pelted ears irritably in homes all over Southern California during the hours before sunrise, when UpLink’s legion of secretaries dialed the numbers of the company’s network security personnel. These men, and a few women, slowly rose from the beds or couches of their apartments or bungalows, and groped for the necks of conventional phones, or maybe the arches of headphones, and hailed the other end in original groggy ways. Not all were asleep. Some, in fact, were playing the new release of PS2 Dragon Ball Z game when their games were interrupted.

They all wondered what the copy-and-paste illiterates in the executive offices needed

figured out. They probably wondered how the spreadsheet data vanished, or some such...

Most listened with the usual ill-masked condescension of the dependable office technocrat, sure the answer to whatever they had in the corporate rectum could be wiped out with a sheet from the help contents.

Then they heard the hysterics. Their faces paled. Their mouths plumed green liquid. They speed-dialed India.

“Sanjay, we’ve got some real trouble!” They called their own employees, their own enlightened computer gurus, their hired crutches for CODE RED alerts.

Los Angeles, Ca

April 16, 2004

From the Los Angeles Times:

'Iraq War Contract Worker Wanted for Murder.

News from Iraq gets dirtier all the time. Just this morning, the Los Angeles Times received information implicating soldier-for-hire, Paul Evens, for the murder of a popular and well-regarded Arkansas shop-owner. According to statements taken after the murder, Evens revealed that the death occurred after the owner confessed to relations with Evens' wife, but the police neglected to charge the former marine, despite having a video tape that clearly shows Evens throwing the Mormon shop-owner into traffic.

Evens is currently in Southern Iraq, fighting under the orders of his boss, Roger Gordian, yes, the same Roger Gordian who operates his private army, Sword, in hot spots throughout the world. Gordian cannot be reached for comment.

Paul Evens was a self-employed repo man in Bennington, Arkansas, at the time of the murder. A former marine attack helicopter pilot, Evens was reprimanded and reduced in rank

for disobeying orders, and the reckless endangerment of Somali civilians in 1993. He did, however, manage to work his way to an honorable discharge after finishing the service for which he'd been recalled for when activated from the Marine Reserves in early 2002.

Our legal correspondent tells us the Department of Justice has determined that the task of arresting a military contract worker 'in an active theater' falls under the responsibility of the Department of Defense. We're watching to see how this turns out.'

The DOJ did indeed stick DOD with the case, leaving two very miffed CIS (Criminal Investigative Service) agents the burden of bringing in the alleged murderer. Because Evens was a Marine as late as 2002, the brass (the Undersecretary of Defense) determined that the job belonged to NCIS, the Navy Criminal Investigative Service. It was early morning in Virginia when the Secretary of the Navy got the call. He didn't feel like handling it, so he grumpily phoned the JAG office, and asked the Admiral in charge to task one of his lawyers with finding whether the Navy truly had any obligation to arrest this civilian.

The JAG had a heavy workload involving a prison case in Cuba, so he passed it off to a junior Lieutenant, and left the office for his dawn C-21 Lear flight to GITMO. The Lieutenant shopped around for someone to pass it off to, but he was the last person to delegate to.

Spike TV was showing *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine*, and he'd hoped to have an hour open to watch it during a lunch break. Nuts.

Unhappy to be where the buck stopped, he didn't put much effort into researching how the Navy could legally shirk the responsibility placed on it, the Lieutenant informed the Admiral they'd have to take it, so the Admiral, or rather, the Admiral's secretary, tossed the bad news back up to the Secretary of the Navy, who called the Secretary

of Defense, who piped the information to the National Security Advisor in the White House.

Finally, at noon eastern time, Secretary Rice whispered news to President Bush that two NCIS agents were flying to Baghdad International Airport to pick up the former marine. That's how the process was 'stovepiped' around.

As a fitting punishment for failing to pass the task to someone else, the Admiral offered the NCIS officers a legal officer; the young Lieutenant. Within official Washington, one never refuses legal oversight, or else certain eyes will look into what sort of untidy practices one is hiding.

So even after the President is told a team is on the job, a few last minute additions are made to the roster. Some caskets from Germany are arriving at Andrews, so the Admiral kindly advises they divert to a small field in Patuxent River, Maryland. Whatever an RC-135 Joint Rivet was doing in hangar 105 of the Navy's test field, it had a few seats open for a small investigative team and a military writer that requested a seat.

The writer had his own reasons for being grumpy that morning. The Navy had refused his request to let a photographer go with him. They'd apologized, insincerely, saying a JAG had requested the seat at the last minute. Well, the military mission does come first...

He looked up from the Sony VIAO laptop he was tapping his fingers across, looked back down, and did a double-take. He saw three white people in white Navy uniforms. One was a tall photogenic man with dark hair, one was an equally photogenic woman with equally dark hair, and the third was a doughy looking younger officer. Is CBS filming a television show in here?

They were worth a picture with the three-mega pixel camera. A cheery Navy tech

with a name tag reading ‘Jones’ clasped both hands to the earphones he had plugged in to one of the new digital COTS audio recorders. The writer didn’t know someone could smile that wide without the cruel assistance of a knife. He wondered if Jones knew that Apple’s iTunes player could store more digital audio than the COTS’ 5.2GB capacity. Well, considering that most armed forces probably don’t even have digital tapes, that’s not so bad.

The three law enforcement types processed the same scene differently. Jones, obviously, was eavesdropping on one civilian electro-magnetic emissions within United States territory. Sure, he was just rehearsing for his airtime over Indian Country, but still, the law’s the law.

The navy crime scene investigators turned their attention away from the workstation operators, and toward the writer. They wished to talk over the case, but weren’t sure what to say before civilian ears. They glared, then mentally threw up their hands, and delved into some manila folders.

The Lieutenant set a Playstation One, super-modified in anticipation of the PSP, in his crossed lap.

“Does anyone want to play Tekken?”

Chapter 16

Besieged, Acts I and II

‘Laws affect mainly those willing to obey them’ –The National Rifle Association

‘Mien Kampf, Mien Gott, Mine Dogs!!!!!! ’ –David W. of Dorset England, Via chat room

Seps Exertus

They’d intentionally built it in the low country, in isolation, enticing. Many nervously spoke of the valley base as a Bien Dien Phu custom-ordered for the Prophet of Patmos, an arena for Armageddon, a place to die.

Roger Gordian listened respectfully in his South-East Iraq compound, but always replied that his ultimate tactical strategy for Camp William Eaton matched that for Khe Sanh. Low intensity conflicts are about attrition, and the best way to pull the enemy into large numbers is to coax them into attacking an irresistible target.

The first omen that the attack was on the way occurred on the major road to the west, where an UpLink vehicle Gordian hadn't told anyone about fell into an ambush.

It was a rare lapse in morality, one in a coming series, that contrived the opening volley in the assault. The target was an ordinary 18-wheel tractor-trailer rig, a fuel tanker without escort, at least, no escort except for two UAVs piloted by the only two people Roger Gordian could trust to accept this outrage; himself, and the perfect marine, the remorseless Paul Evens. The truck's personnel were unemployable, un-insurable, and unfit for duty, at least by humane standards. Each man was early in a terminal illness, and had failed physicals for other contract companies. The driver, Eric Burk from Mississippi, had bone cancer, and maybe two months to live. He got a twenty thousand dollar signing bonus, ten thousand a month, and a fifty thousand insurance policy. He'll almost certainly make less than ninety thousand for his family.

Val Janikowski of Buffalo, New York, got the passenger seat. His paper mill happened to close when his enlarged heart needed replacing. Without company insurance or money, he didn't see how to pay for an operation, even if he had a match on the waiting list. He got a smaller signing bonus.

Jimmy Boute, a Creole from Mississippi, had once been an Ensign in the Coast Guard. He'd dipped since he was twelve, and now at thirty, throat cancer persistently comes back. He isn't technically terminally ill, but what the heck? He mans an equally expendable belted M60 as a waist-gunner in the trailer. If the barrel overheats, he'll just mount another. They're surpluses, ready to be melted down and converted to something more useful. Maybe to make a monument of peace in San Francisco.

Mfume Ali, an Aids survivor, had realized his drug cocktail no longer protected him from infection. In exchange for a heavy fee, and enough antibacterials and the latest

antivirals, his gloved hands removed the hot barrels from the Vietnam-era gun, and reattached cool ones.

These men and others fatalistically went about their jobs behind steel sheets, broken concrete blocks, and sandbags.

They drove a racetrack course up and down the national road, sitting in discount lawn chairs in the trailer with access to drums of the drinks of their choice and prepackaged food. Camelpak vests cooled them from heat, and olive-green 7.62mm boxes rested on treadmills, operable at the flick of an electric switch, and the gas tank ceiling shielded them from the sun.

They called themselves the Euthanasia Kings, and they were six in all- two in the cab, two side-gunners, the barrel man, and a tail-gunner. The wheel-man drove from the American driver side, so the passenger/gunner could properly return fire into (hostile) traffic.

They remained relaxed yet perceptive all day, laughing, listening to music. Boute had his turn with the stereo selection, so it was zydeco hour. Val, the New Yorker, had arranged the cab ride to get away from the noise. Burk always listened to country, not Val's taste, but more digestible than Creole. *Those people will turn anything that makes a racket into an instrument, and will label any cacophony as music.*

Then Boute has the stones to call techno 'Eurotrash!'

He hoped they all lived till tomorrow. Robin Williams will be on the air, and they all plan to listen together.

Between then and now, they have a truce for the next hour, a dose of NPR, then a flavor of Radio BBC, and before sunset, Armed Forces Radio. Maybe if they're behind schedule, they'll laugh at the English broadcast of Iran's state station. Then Hezbollah

Radio in Damascus, if the truck breaks down.

Everyone was at ease when the tail gunner shouted out. The tail gunner tended patrol through the smallest outlet to the world, a thin slit concealed by a transparent blue sticker from the outside. Although everything had an azure tinge, shapes and motion were frighteningly real enough.

“Heads up, we have a Tango in pursuit.” All bolted to the ready. “Jimmy, on your side.”

“I got him,” drawled the southerner, lining up a shot just as the overhead Unmanned Air Vehicle (UAV) squelches the radio.

“We have him, Xavier,” replied Ali, calling the vehicle by its radio handle. They’re using Marvel Comic characters when flying in a pair. The second drone is called Logan.

Jimmy opened wide his side panel, protruded the gun barrel out, and linked his fire with Val’s. All very routine. The car, Jimmy noted, had the truck door removed, to open up a perch for an RPD heavy gunner. ‘Hmm, watch his body spasm. The drum mag shattered, bronze tokens showered out. Yawn-worthy, this was so routine. The glass, worthy of a tired sigh, engorged into a pack of Arab meat, a hazard they should have foreseen. They never plan for being shot, as if it doesn’t happen every day. Tragic, that. Without being ill, they demonstrate more indifference than the Euthanasia Kings, a pity and a half.’

“This is Logan. I see a limpet mine on your stern, over.”

Probably on a short timer. It’s now no wonder they drove in close for a point-blank cab shot; the fatal wound was insured. So, tactics have changed again.

“Roger,” Mfume responded flatly, “I’m on it.”

The trailer had one last notable piece of electronics worth mentioning, and its inter-

face was a simple switch on a box. Mfume flipped it, activating a small generator which coursed juice down copper cables webbed around the hull, “degaussing” it. Roughly two seconds passed before an explosion rocked the rear wheels.

“Looks like it was on a timer, alright. They’ve obviously figured out we’ve fudged their radio detonators,” opined the rear gunner, who just closed up his hatch.

“Yeah, good thing we flipped it on in time,” seconded Jimmy.

“I’d like to meet the person that thought of that before I die.” A good mile ahead, a mudjaheddin teen shimmied down his lookout post, a creosote telephone pole, just after lighting the signal tire he’d nailed up there.

The flame shouted in the jihad’s name that the crusader’s fuel still came. The incendiary signal hastened the movements of the assembled Mahdi forces.

Quickly, as if pulling guns from licking fire, they attached the radio trigger to the bulbous RPG-7 shell, and stuffed the hot bomb into its camouflage; the ribcage of a Bedouin dog killed by a rushing car. It didn’t offer much punch, but young boys could surely haul it to the roadside before the infidel’s frequency sweep caught them with their own petard. Again.

The boys’ commander, Kassam, age 17, didn’t much like the openness of the martyrdom field chosen, but the day had come when the enemy was just too alert in the cities.

With the well-masked machine-gun nests, maybe Allah will smile on them. The degaussing had been a masterstroke. Now, with the copper mesh’s dampening of magnetic fields, the Tangos out there can’t even stick mines to the trucks, and they’ve had mysterious troubles with their remote bombs for months now. They’ll have no effective choice but to improvise or get into direct gun battles from now on. It will be just as it should.

Eric Burk clutched his lucky eight ball, the head ornament of his stick shift, and geared the Peterbuilt semi to eleventh. It gave a mother of resistance, at least to a guy with malignant cells in his skeleton. He may be forced to take a gun station soon.

In the far distance was a shepherd's shack, over eight-hundred meters from the road. Well, that makes it a useless firing point for anyone with most Russian small arms, Burk thought.

The radio crackled.

"Jean Gray, be advised. You're passing a Stone Age signal flare: a burning tire. Cowboy up, 'cause the Comanche are all riled up."

Eric unhooked the mike.

"Roger that, Xavier. I'll pull a 'U,' and see how they're flustered."

He applied the brake, shifted down, and made an eighteen-wheeler's famous wide turn left, off the road.

"That got 'em antsy," deadpanned his side-gunner, Val. Kids in white robes and keffiyeh scraped out of their burrows, giving frantic chase. Two boys crew-served a Chinese Type 58 RPD reproduction, while lying on the flat ground. The April wind eased sand aloft, not at all heavy enough to obscure them from sight.

The truck caught them with a broadside barrage from the Vietnam-era slung-on squad guns. The cab gunner walked his fusillade up from the barrel, hefting a boy's lead left leg, worked the swath over the abdomen, and puncturing the liver, releasing a gusher of black blood. His comrade ate dirt in time to avoid judgment.

Jimmy reacted against a cornucopia of boys ejecting from a wealth of holes. Iraq as a hornet's nest was no longer just a metaphor. By keeping the pallor piece scalding a little longer, until the physics of the metal changed to red line status.

The child soldiers became more and more a rearward problem, until the tail stole his field of fire.

“Anyone hit? Anyone hit?” Boute removed his tool, put Mfume to work, and swiveled back and forth, checking for bullet holes. They were aplenty, just not in the gray up-armored parts.

“Ali!” Boute manhandled the sports drink cylinder, upturned the contents... not to celebrate winning the Super Bowl.

“Ah!” Ali’s pupils dilated, his gloveless fingers plied apart, smoke evaporated. Jim watched dumbstruck as Mfume wailed.

“Stay at your post!” It was the left gunner, Dennis Trammel, shouting at the tail gunner. His eyes reflected the soul of a berserker. He impatiently deluged his heated gun from the Camelpak, then crackled a second suppressive spray. Ali’s screams didn’t quit; the gloves had burned so quickly.

Jimmy’s eyes slowly panned to the bow, to a service ladder. They had one more fresh M60 up top, fully exposed. Tied by indecision, motion slowed. He gripped for traction. Amid all the friction outside, nothing had his grip. A tracer plinked high on the tank, deflecting its trajectory down, between the shoulder blades. He crashed to both knees, and found the traction needed.

“Hey Ali,” he whispered/hailed, “listen, I need a lift.”

Mfume’s onyx eyes narrowed, confused.

The Mississippi native lapsed redneck.

“Don’t look stupid, y’hear? Forklift your arms under my armpits, and haul me up that ladder before I rip the black off you!”

Those were fighting words, and the black man didn’t hide his rancorous expression,

but yielded from striking.

“I’ve got you. Ally-oo!”

“Appreciated.”

Above

“They’re out in numbers,” Roger Gordian observed sourly, “and these flechette rockets are so expensive, too.” Not compared to guided ordnance, or a lost life.

“If we’re here to win, then so be it, Xavier. We did this for a lopsided attrition win, and I’m counting fifty-plus hostiles sprawled in the open,” radioed ‘Logan.’

“I’m taking the shot, old man. That’s what my paycheck is for, after all.”

“I’m arming the napalm rockets, to be thrifty.”

Burn baby, burn.

The marine yawed the nose left, descends, lining the yellow brackets over the youngster barking orders, and removed the trigger guard. Paul briefly pondered if Mohammad neglected to promise these guys a burn ward in paradise, then tapped the HOTAS (Hands-On-Throttle-and-Stick) firing stud, martyring some more. He pulls back the stick, rudders hard left, tops out, and slopes back for a second pass.

Phosphorous burns fiercely when exposed to oxygen, and that’s why Evens deployed a duo of those.

“Still within my payload: high-explosive rockets number four, and the flechettes in inventory equal two. I suppose Uncle Sam is supposed to graft new skin on those kids, over.”

Evens banked steeply, grazed the deck, and goosed the throttle, for the surviving fighters elevated their aim.

Gord followed the tracers, and let slip the coup de grace.

The insidious rubber miasma, or rather, that smoking tire, again.

“So, do you like audio books?”

Eric Burke attempted to lighten the mood, seeing another prone force ahead. One hand rested on the eight ball. *Go for it*, he thought, putting the turbocharged ‘Pete’ in overdrive.

“Punks ahead, punks on both flanks. This is one bad neighborhood.”

In the open wing glass all trucks seem to have, a beefy Desert Eagle ‘cannon’ pistol dangled. Burke was really particular with his ballistics. He wanted the limited edition ten-inch gold .50 caliber from IMI (Israeli Military Industries) and a firm from Minnesota (Magnum Research Inc.), packed with a seven round magazine, containing seven steel-jacketed 325 grain hollow point bullets.

He thumbed the big safety, and pondered why exactly he insisted on this piece.

Well, for starters, he reasoned, using a semi auto would remove the temptation to spray-and-pray, and second, this gun could make bigger holes than any other semi auto pistol. Third, he acknowledged, TV and books had pulled him into the hype around his model; and a dying man can be vain. He has the right, you know.

Burke’s mind drifted back to reality when the pistol jammed. He manually cycled the slide, and bored another garnet cavity on another high torso. Another? *Guess I’m on autopilot.*

‘This looks disquietly like the Los Angeles riots of 1992. Gawd, they’re close!’

The lazy man’s armor kit is seemingly holding. They’d used an easy, ancient method, dating back to the 1948 Arab-Israeli feud. You just take a sheet of scrap metal and some concrete mortar, and sandwich the pieces together. It’s no harder than working in

a Chicago deli, ha ha! You get double the metal with a concrete layer, and you have no need for spot-welding.

The pistol clicked empty, so he dumped the spent clip, jacked in another, and reentered the fray.

Clump.

They punctured the tank again. Burke tried isolating the sound. It resealed before breathing in enough air for the fuel to go through combustion. No boom.

Another exothermic reaction, however, caught the front left fender. Eric read the dials.

“Temperature is climbing; they cut the water pump.”

He fish-tailed the vehicle.

“Power steering is kludgy. Well, this has been a pleasure.”

Jimmy Boute tugged the shimmering ammo belt, and locked it tight in his 'sixty' placed above not just any article of armor but the big 1500 can of munitions, and the rear armor plate of a HUMVV.

He witnessed disturbing smoke trails, but nothing incoming. He pursued the sources to friendly drones, two of them, pounding Hades out of Tango congregations. A whiz-pop meant lethal nails dispersed out the sides of flechette rockets. Enemy boots toppled in synchronization with the noise; flash and thunder.

Flames of damnation boiled left and right. Concussive blasts tenderized uncooked meat. A-ha! Read your Marx! Americans are consumers, consumers of Arab meat! Here we are, with two rows of teeth. Gnashing, biting. You disdainfully call us a consumer society? We, the food chain elite?

Boute whipped up some Cajun cooking, he guaranteed. He swept one way, then

another on his turret, then shifted back, just like politics.

Shining casings cascaded down the hole, drumming a champagne toast sort of noise repetitively. The crowd congratulated him every time he fired the weapon, it seemed. That's unnerving, being praised like a puppy.

He graduated to a stop-and-go approach, target, burst, welcome cool air in the barrel, aim, annihilate, repeat.

A quartet of shells deflect upward from the tank slope, colliding with the plate, but one freak angled higher, at his helmet seam.

Brack!

A gash opens on the forehead. Blood stings his tear ducts, and he wipes it away. He realizes the majority of bullets are after him...! His enlightenment comes awfully late, because the threat is now only rearward, and dissipating.

The Euthanasia Kings pull through in time for Val to douse the fires snaking at Eric's feet. The lubricants are drained, meaning friction builds in all the moving parts.

The New Yorker isn't accustomed to uncommon valor, even in this unit, but the fire must be under the hood, and the only way to drench it is by going outside, when they can't stop. Goody.

"Back drafts occur by opening flames to sources of air," Evens radioed, seeing the body hang out the window.

"We know, Logan. He's going to work the nozzle in a niche, and spray around," said the driver.

"Understood. Remember you have some wiper fluid. That's a little extra for beating back the flames."

"Thanks, Logan. Out." They survived their first mission, an anvil and hammer

operation, Euthanasia King style. For this mission alone, CENTCOM recommended Val Janikowski and James Boute for the Medal of Freedom. But when the full report reached the President's desk, the whole unit received the citation, and the president personally pitched Congress for awarding the Peacetime Medal of Honor, since civilians can't be officially recognized for taking part in war.

Many in Congress questioned the reasoning there, but the motion passed for Boute, under the condition the award remain 'black' for five years.

In the United Kingdom, Tenth Downing Street backed the idea of giving Janikowski and Boute the Malta Cross. Parliament seconded, and it was done.

As one last honor, the queen made the crew Commanders of the British Empire.

After a fortnight of battle, Eric Burke became too weak to take part anymore. A British Airways flight took him to a care center in Jackson, Mississippi, where he died with his new Malta Cross.

Mfume Ali occupied a bed in Bethesda, Maryland, in a sterile environment long enough for Roche to release a drug for a niche market; the one he was in. Ervin 'Magic' Johnson volunteered to pay for the treatment.

James 'Jimmy' Boute got over his morbid complex, and decided death wasn't inevitable. He didn't leave Iraq, however. After asking for a revision in his contract, the Mississippi Creole reported for duty at Camp Claire L. Chennault, Sword's brother to William Eaton, on the Iraq-Syria Border.

Dennis Trammel remained a regular rider in the Trojan Horse mission until perishing under fire at a bogus checkpoint in the Al Anbar Province.

Val Janikowski found his heart. . . and a bank that forgave his credit record.

As of Christmas, 2004, he's recuperating from surgery. He promises to fill out his

contract obligations after Iraqi national elections are held in January.

Sword folded the decoy squads after the June handover.

Act II Rater Infinitas

“I think that water will come to be more and more valued as a scarce commodity ...”. –Terasen Inc. chief executive John Reid, quoted in an April 2004 news story. The same news story reported that ‘Reid brushed aside a shareholder’s concern that privatizing municipal water distribution could open the door to foreign acquisition of Canadian water under NAFTA’.

‘Gentlemen, one thing I’ve learned at sea is that the procedure manuals are written by people who have never been at the business end of a torpedo with the plant crashing around them, with the captain shouting for power, where a second’s delay can mean death. The meaning of being an officer in our Navy is knowing more than those operation manuals, knowing how to play when you’re hurt, when the ship is going down and you need to keep shooting anyway. That’s really it, isn’t it men? The ability to play hurt. That’s the only way we’ll ever win a war. And in fact, that’s the only way you can live your lives. Do that for me, guys. Learn to play hurt.’ –Admiral Kinnaird McKee

April fifteenth, Tax Day back home. The television crews film the happenings of contractor life on base, looking for the brighter side, the good news in the mission. They get great human interest stories every night, and plenty of raw footage for award winning documentaries.

On Tax Day, they paid special focus to the latest invention of Roger Gordian’s Wisconsin mind, a deep drilling project. UpLink isn’t competing with the established oilmen, he knows better than that. Nor is he importing the newest oil and natural gas drills. What he’s going after is the solution to a problem that has concerned the CIA community more than the oil crisis for years now.

“The Central Intelligence Agency released a science paper a few years ago that some people have been fretting about. The paper raised concerns that many regions of the world would be so short of fresh water, that nations would actually go into conflict over scarce supplies.

The paper set a start of the crisis for 2015, and the fighting would naturally begin in the Middle-East. What the analysts forgot, however, is that drillers often bore super-deep holes in this portion of the world, estimating there are deep reserves of fuel in the ground. They didn’t know drillers often find deep aquifers at some sites, then jot them down as a bust. They’re looking for a different commodity, and don’t think much of their finds.”

“Heck , where the drillers are from, the United States or Western Europe, fresh water’s as free and plentiful as forests- another resource the Middle-East doesn’t have.”

The visionary deftly dipped one vanilla cream wafer in his favored frothy coffee, and wiped the bottom half against the China cup rim.

“But water’s more difficult to acquire here, but now an ocean’s worth is actually trapped above the oil. We’ve taken some older, supposedly useless drills from the energy giants in the region. It’s a cheap venture, in fact, in comparison to, say, satellite communications.

“And in our strategic location, Geraldo,” Gordian pointed with an outstretched arm, “we can sell here in Iraq, south to Kuwait, south-west to Saudi Arabia, and if relations are fixed anytime soon- with Iran, all without stretching our pipelines more than a hundred miles.”

The reporter recounted the conversation in his head.

“So what your saying is you’ve averted a major regional war over water, created a new industry, and basically, you saved the world. And here I am, right smack dab in the middle. This world can be a funny place.” He shook his head, disbelieving.

Roger basked in history. He liked the rays.

“I estimate we’ll beat the coalition’s Project Eden, the marsh area restoration, by enough years to make the drilling profitable, even if our only market is in Iraq, and it won’t be.”

One of the Marsh Arabs, the Sheik’s son, shifted a scowl at the camera, yet quickly regained his composure.

“So far, we’re supplying ourselves with enough water to drink and bathe with for a major industrialized city, and we’re siphoning a lot of gallons into the barren desert, not enough to cause major erosion, mind you, just trickles at a time, so we don’t screw everything up.”

‘Or maybe he’s siphoning out just enough to keep the locals dependent on his product,’ thought someone nearby.

They watched the afternoon sun wane, as strategists.

Who else needs clean water, India? Is it conceivable to stretch the pipes that far for water? Perhaps there’s no need to lay new pipes, if we can connect to existing bone-dry lines servicing Tehran, then join into any Afghan pipelines lain by coalition forces (if they have any).

Roger didn’t believe the infrastructure existed. *Oh well, maybe shipping the water will be profitable. If not, the market’s profitable enough right here. That’s concrete, not a pipe dream. O ho! A pun, pipe dream.*

The boss continued gazing at construction, specifically, the new concrete dome being

inflated with the new balloon construction method, when the well cap burst, opening an artificial geyser.

A construction crew emerged from the mist, drenched and hyper-awakened. *Something interesting is happening.*

“Look’s like something’s up,” understated Gordian, “I think we’d better go inside.”

“You bet. Ladies and gentlemen, we are in danger, but we will gallantly report the news as it’s happening-”

The boss yanked the reporter’s arm.

“Come on, you idiot! There’s no time for B.S!”

Southern Iraq

The USA Army’s 3rd Infantry Division had swept a patrol through the previous hour, using an M2A3 Bradley to considerably beef up a force previously made up of HMMWVs, but the khaki vehicles have since returned north. All moved as Plenkanov has foretold.

Now only if the A-10 patrol doesn’t spot us, mused Ruzhyo.

He led a shock team of his choosing just north of the extreme southern city of Umm Qasr,

to the right off Highway #7, the route to Basra.

The target is the internment facility, Camp Bucca (named for Ronald Bucca, a New York City fire marshal who perished in the aftermath of the 9/11 attack), guarded by the 800th Military Police Brigade, a reserve unit of 1,700 out of New York.

According to the plan, which is iffy, Ruzhyo should have his own surprise column inside.

Ruzyho had due respect for the regular and special combat forces of the United States, but let his disdainful feelings show toward these Yankee cops.

His feelings showed in the size of his own strike force; himself, Grigory Zemya, or the Snake, Job Geroj, the hero, and Peter Strelok, the team's designated marksman.

Unless a shakedown has changed the status created in last night's fog, the team has the support of a couple of inmates scheduled to move out for the exercise yard at eleven A.M.

The Chechen also wasn't sure of the reliability of his prison recruits in terms of their loyalty, and ability to hide contraband from even the most bored of Empire State corrections officers. He'd decided to institute a few extravagant flourishes within the assault, figuring a multitude of different trick teeth could compensate for an inelegant script.

It was a feat of application and imagination, but Plenkanov had successfully added trace gradients of solid rocket propellant and microfiber strands of sensitive wires surrounding the temperature-sensitive propellant. The result is a danger that radio frequency radiation births the risk of explosive detonation. In military parlance, all the vehicles in the parking lot are not HERO safe, meaning they're not protected against HAZARDS OF ELECTROMAGNETIC RADIATION TO ORDNANCE.

Job Geroj appreciated the touch, after Strelok explained it to him.

They aren't HERO safe, alright.

It's more than a minor footnote that the early Hydra 70 rocket motor, not HERO safe, had caused the devastating fire on the USS Forestal's (CV-59) deck.

The emitter is in the guise of a pirate radio station just over in Kuwait's border.

If Ruzhyo had felt his normal self, he'd have enjoyed the irony. Plenkanov's nemesis,

Roger Gordian, had served aboard the flat-topped vessel in the summer of 1967, when that inspirational fire had broken out. Then the ship was retired September 11, 1993. On the eighth anniversary of the ship's entrance into mothballing, the namesake for the prison they planned to attack had been killed. Try figuring out all the super symmetry in that!

Just a trick of mathematics, the rifle dismissed, realizing his brain was attempting his rescue from despair by wandering. What had the Scot, Milton, said? "What need a man forestall his date of grief and run to meet what he would most avoid?" What had Strelok, the shooter, meant when he'd relayed that quote in Persia, and what had he sensed in the Chechen? Strelok is clearly not straight in the head, even more scrambled than the typical solitary sniper.

Maybe. He could think over it, when the time is right. As for the matter of his craft, this 800th Military Police Brigade is a component of what had once been the 77th Army Infantry Division, which had made a heroic stand during the Meuse-Argonne Offensive of World War One. Cobbled together as the 'Lost Battalion,' they'd shown surprising substance under the leadership of Major Charles S. Whittlesey, a Congressional Medal of Honor winner, said Strelok.

Ruzhyo vaguely remembered seeing the movie in the hospital waiting room, on the History Channel.

Strelok had shown mirth in relating the tale of their messenger pigeon, that had been named Bon Cher, or something French like that. After crediting the bird for saving the unit, they'd stuffed it, and displayed it in a museum.

They've gone from there, to being 'regional support.' Are they now just a legacy with no modern meat? Maybe.

“One final note about them, Rifle. The big-shot war correspondent, Ernie Pyle, was attached to them when a Japanese sniper zapped him.”

Strelok had probably imagined doing the deed himself, and had probably re-enacted the event on some Pacific island, ideally, one covered in volcanic ash. The shooter followed the history of his craft carefully.

One time, Peter Strelok had role played his favorite book, using all his contract earnings on paying actors to take part, just so he could re-create the conditions needed to assassinate the late Charles de Gaulle. Sane people just don't do that sort of thing.

They've made it to their op point with a few minutes to spare. Ruzhyo unfolded the butt of his AN-94, without question a tool perfectly suited for Mikhail the Rifle. He'd read reports of the crappy ergonomics. Ha! Maybe for clumsy Russian conscript hands, but a Chechen out of SpetsNez can get used to a strange new rifle. He especially adored what the 5.45x39mm jacketed round could do in the 2-round burst mode of fire, but sadly, was the only one so interested.

Grigory and Geroj both stuck with the trusted AK design, going for modern 'Western' Kalashnikovs, with polymer parts and chambered for 5.56x45. Neanderthals.

Strelok, the team's designated shooter, fielded the latest variant of the classic SVD.

Peter, the Shooter, circumscribed the facility's spa in the aperture of his scope. A few off-duty bathers played under the gazebo. How smart of them to construct such a diversion from the same old grind. Well, we have more than enough diversions to compensate.

Inside the Prison

The most convenient thing about infiltrating an internment camp is that you don't need to craft a safe personal history to get inside. As it turns out, the military actually

aspires to take in the ones with dirtier records! Ideally, the coalition is looking for suspicious expatriate individuals, because, for one thing, honest hardworking Iraqis don't really care if an innocent (or shady) Jordanian is arrested. Despite all the talk by pundits about Iraqis not having a sense of nationalism, most on the street identify better with someone who'd lived under Saddam's regime, then, say, the late King Hussein.

Second, a foreigner better fits the profile of a terrorist, at least to the coalition's world view. So, Scimitar, as he was known to Ruzhyo, made it all too easy for a troop of Polish soldiers to scoop him up in a counter-intelligence sweep. Then he'd artfully orchestrated a 'dropsy' of Jordanian identification at their provocation.

It hasn't been a fun stay, but then yesterday, weaved within the morning mist, Gospel, the bringer of good news, slipped by the wire with a nicely balanced compact Derringer, a double-barreled one, with a snub nose, just enough handle to grip a single finger around, and sights filed down to a nub.

That Ruzhyo character didn't care much for large caliber guns, and that had shown when he'd commanded Gospel to pass on a snub nose .22 Derringer. He'd asked the impossible.

"You've never been to Ford's Theater, have you," he'd said, leaving Strelak to explain the assassination of Abraham Lincoln at the aftermath of the American Civil War. The sick Russian had re-enacted it for him. So, a head shot from a single meter is possible, that doesn't make escape too promising.

It was time. The plump footfalls of yet another American rent-a-cop intruded on his reverie. Stomaching his doubt, Scimitar, ha, he'd be within scimitar range, cornered around his 8x8 foot cell for his only chance for a shot from concealment. The guard, the Jordanian could barely see, wore a black muscle shirt with a company logo.

Scimitar aimed for the animal depiction in the upper chest. The guard, now swiping a smart card, leaned only four feet away, but the Jordanian bothered to aim, mimicking the logo of the Tom Clancy endorsed games. At some level, he felt like a cricket player, posed like so, but somehow, it felt right. He yearned for more practice, but felt content in this role.

When he panned attention down the corridor, registering the tiny gun, Scimitar flexed the finger on the steel. They'd put him in this hole solely for being a Palestinian newly arrived in Iraq in April of 2003, had ignored Habeas Corpus, and kept him shackled half the day! Tariq Assad couldn't take it anymore. Just one good opening, and this Arab's rampaging!

The door opens. This is the right time for the exercise yard, alright. Oh boy, it's another fat one, big surprise. It's all the pork and beans, they've got to stop stocking their slops with that foul pork and beans!

This one had a silver beard with his porcine features. He looks like St. Nickolaus, as portrayed on Coke bottles, except more dull and witless.

"C'mon, tis time do your Dervish-dance outdoors. Now git moving to Sandland. God, I hate this place."

The pig sighed. These abductors sigh a whole lot. They must miss their pastures and filled slops.

BANG!

Upon solid contact, mercury fulminate surged behind the brute force, crashing a liquid metal tide against lipids, a sea of lipids, and other body makeup. Banned by international treaty, exploding bullets inject the smallest of calibers into horrendous projectiles.

Scimitar paled, suppressed a twitching in his extremities. The guard retreats against a security door, looking baptized by demons. The aorta, lying open, extracted from beneath the ribs, sputtered. Assad, named for the lion, plastered the backup pig to the wall, mindful to elevate his turgid shoulder hard under that porcine chin. That way, brain's base clashed with a hard metal sheet. The man's eyes flickered dormant. Assad had hammered the Occipital Lobe hard enough.

Time is short. Move on now.

A gunshot, punctuated by a muffled explosion, awakened Gospel from his religious studies.

Eleven O'clock. Well, Mr. Scimitar is on time, he mused, while keeping his nose in the musty holy book.

Gospel, the good news, peeked right at his cell's door. His glance met the ebony eyes of a dark American checking on him. The guard shut the slit peephole. He didn't see the duel timed detonation pencils stuck in an aluminum foil-wrapped cake of gelignite (nitroglycerin, guncotton, wood pulp, and potassium nitrate).

Gospel had been counting in his head, and guessed the detonation strikers were due to spring, so he sought refuge under a bunk. He had really cut it close...

Outside

"There's an uprising!"

Peter Strelock held the dark crosshairs of his scope a finger length above the dogtags of a shirtless white male, thankful for an exposed target larger than a head for once. H was at the extreme range of his gun's capabilities, and knew the rifles MOA roamed dangerously wide under these conditions. A torso he can hit... even if it's turning!

“Enemy attack! Tangos are here!”

The shooter, as much as he didn't like the role, plinked a sandy-haired Caucasian male leaping from the pool, swiveled one bi-pod peg left... oh, a woman, a young one with Slavic features, ducked under the water. A blond, the strawberry kind, she looked the part of the 'first crush' substitute teacher.

Don't hesitate! As much as she may look civilian, she could reach an Armalite any second!

She slumped in the garnet spa, with the half dozen others. She'll be another face to coalesce with the others.. The Kuwait pirate radio station received it's scheduled 11:00 AM automated phone call from the US Naval Observatory's atomic clock within a very small fraction of the correct time, starting a chain of events that benefited the enemy in Iraq.

“What? I heard an explo- Ah!”

Not every car exploded. The odds were actually absurdly low that any one car would, but the parking lot held dozens of vehicles, so all together, the odds of at least one car detonating was nearly certain.

As it happened, it was a white Department of Defense Chevy Suburban that succumbed to random chance. A piece of copper wire, barely a centimeter long, had a crumb of solid rocket fuel clinging to the side. The fuel tank, half full, had enough air to support combustion, and the speck of rocket fuel had just enough buoyancy, thanks to an air bubble, to float to the surface, when the radio station's electronic emissions passed through the vehicle.

The Chevy body violently expanded as if directed by John Woo, shaking a semi-buoyant wire-rocket fuel combo to the top of a civilian Hummer H2. That vehicle

surrendered to high-energy chemistry, committing fratricide against a military brother parked beside it. Their flames merged, generating enough heat to melt, then consume, the flammable paint of an Iraqi Police Honda, holding a suspect waiting for detainment. The rolled-up windows imploded, then kicked back out, propelled by the back draft of bursting compressed air.

That beat-up cop car had come in leaking motor oil, conveniently close to the front tire of an HEMMT. That truck had just been lubed with a petrochemical grease.

Eventually, parts of every car were set aflame, cooking off enough heat to melt the asphalt; and spark the mother-of-all flashes. Gospel motioned with his smoking snub-nosed Saturday Night Special, down to four S&W rounds, toward the tool of the man he'd just executed. The fellow inmate got the idea. It was easier not looking at his face, the Arab realized, even if this man had been face-down, spread-eagle.

Gospel motioned again, this time nonverbally requesting that the other inmate, now armed with a stolen Beretta, follow down the corridor.

He, in turn, motioned for two other inmates, wielding shock batons, to follow him. Gospel then mustered the courage to earn his Nom de Guerre.

"Fellow believers. The Mudjaheddin are here to cast out the infidel from unholy abomination we're in!"

He smiled grimly at reciting the atrocious dialog of some Western film villain. The smile turned more lopsided, more genuine, hearing the responsive cries of his brethren.

He assigned one club man to try keying some cells open.

"But don't take your sweet time. In this mess, the least active is bound to lose."

Ahead, an unusual pop.

"Scimitar! We're coming, bro!"

The comrade trotted to the group, working his only reload into the puny piece, the Derringer he'd just emptied.

Suddenly, a giant pummeled the penitentiary.

"What was that?" asked a club man.

"Radio Free Caliphate," quipped the Gospel, "now let's hit the exit!" Ruzhyo peeked left, saw Strelock ruffle his Ghillie suit, snapped his vision forward.

A fool shouldered a riot gun, maybe a Super Shorty shotgun, about a hundred meters ahead. He was strangely in black SWAT battle dress. Most guys encountered have worn cloth. The Chechen's senses opened up, out of professional curiosity, to record his first live-combat use of the Nikonov AN-94's automatic double-tap.

Grigory leap-frogged ahead, Job sprayed around the prison corner, fearful, Mikhail believed. Whatever, he covered Strelock's sprint to the next op point, a dirt pile by the canal.

The Snake knelt by the shotgun, explored the mechanics, vented vitriol at an exit.

"Whoa!" The uprising sprawled flat under the staccato routine of a semi auto shotgun.

Gospel braved a peek. A armored MP taped a lower abdominal wound on himself, then sprayed a short burst outside.

He's alone, a circumstance of chaos, mused the good news, formulating a plan.

I've got him.

Up, he bumrushed the crouched reserve trooper.

"Ugh!" Zemya had his AK muzzle on the door when two bodies tumbled through, eight limbs flailing. Ruzhyo shouted, halting the Snake, and affixed his bayonet. He used the rifle's long reach to avoid the fray, then struck. Kevlar offered no resistance, as

the Rifle jabbed hard in a New York cop's lower back, but bone dislodged the blade.

"Huh, I shouldn't have dragged it," he said, in English. "Gospel, can you make it with us?" He fluttered back to Arabic.

"I am well, comrade. The others, I don't know of their health, but they've been well fed."

Ruzhyo curtly approved.

"Let's hustle like our days are short!"

The team, with new members, extracted to the ditch, under cover of Strelok.

"We have concealed hogan with arms and rations. Conditions are primitive, but safe from armed forces."

They trudged away.

Chapter 17

Besieged, Act III

‘A Canadian citizen with U.S. nationality came to Iraq. ... He might have benefited Iraq, I don’t know. They say the Iraq intelligence service is spread over Europe. But nobody spoke of human rights of the Canadian citizen of U.S. nationality. After he came to Iraq, they killed him.’ –Saddam Hussein, addressing the world after Dr. Gerald Bull’s murder in 1990

‘I am a United States Navy Flyer. My countrymen built the best airplane in the world and entrusted it to me. They trained me to fly it. I will use it to the absolute limit of my power. With my fellow pilots, aircrews, and deck crews, my plane and I will do anything necessary to carry out our tremendous responsibilities. I will always remember that we are part of an unbeatable combat team-the United States Navy. When the going is fast and rough, I will not falter. I will be uncompromising in every blow I strike. I will be humble in victory. I am a United States Navy Flyer. I have dedicated myself to my country, with its many millions of all races, colors and creeds. They and their way of life are worthy of my greatest protection effort. I ask the help of God in

making that effort great enough.’ –US Navy Flyers’ Creed

Camp William Eaton

“**S**Eck, where the drillers are from, the United States or Western Europe, fresh water’s as free and plentiful as forests- another resource the Middle-East doesn’t have.”

He soaked his wafers in coffee, just like any day in San Jose, or Washington, or wherever. This wasn’t your usual wherever.

“But water’s more difficult to acquire here, but now an ocean’s worth is actually trapped above the oil. We’ve taken some older, supposedly useless drills from the energy giants in the region. It’s a cheap venture, in fact, in comparison to, say, satellite communications. And in our strategic location, Geraldo, we can sell here in Iraq, south to Kuwait, south-west to Saudi Arabia, and if relations are fixed anytime soon- with Iran, all without stretching our pipelines more than a hundred miles.”

There was more space before it happened. What was said?

“So what you’re saying is you’ve averted a major regional war over water, created a new industry, and basically, you saved the world. And here I am, right smack dab in the middle. This world can be a funny place.” The Puerto Rican reporter shook his disbelieving head.

The Sheik’s son looked like he’d tried communicating with telepathy, or explode Gordian’s head with telekinesis. *Why?*

POP!

“You bet. Ladies and gentlemen, we are in danger, but we will gallantly report the news as it’s happening-”

There it was, the well cap had burst open. Play back the sound. Something arched at it, fast.

Roger Gordian remembered the events, check, and proceeded to find his bearings. *First, get off your butt-*

“Stay down, Sir, the attack isn’t over!”

Right. He felt behind his hips, to discover what his back lay against. Flat panels, grooved, sanded, polished, coated. It was wood. *Gently knock...* It was hard wood. He recalled the scene. Behind his lawn chair had been something Peter Nimec had imported, out of nostalgia. It was a high-end Brunswick billiards table, the kind he liked to hustle with. The Navy pilot turned his head right, seeing the table’s owner, crouched behind a replica jukebox, one shattered by shrapnel. He had the futuristic gun, the XM8 carbine, ready, a potential source of vicious reciprocity.

Nimec, an ex US Army Ranger, caught the boss’ image from the aged corner of his eye.

“The artillery seems really distant. I can’t hear the shots being fired.” He figuratively kept his ear to the ground.

“The rate of fire is an arthritic snail. We’re being hit ballpark four rounds a minute.”

Roger tried catching his voice.

“Pardon?”

“A lone gunman?”

“Yeah. We aren’t under attack from anything else. Find-”

Another shell rumbled over the razor wire, wrecking Nimec’s concentration.

Rog wrung water from his shirt, wadded up more cloth, and tried again.

“The first shell fell close. It’s a miracle we’re still alive,” he shouted, running for the

situations room door.

“Not so,” Nimec puffed, “when they hit the well cap, it sprang enough hydraulic pressure...”

“I understand. It punted the shrapnel away.”

“Affirmative. Water has some awesome properties, as Bruce Lee would remind us.”

They ran through a fine mist, a dissipating mist, because the automatic valve was turning.

Nimec bolted in reverse, pivoted, yelled.

“News crew, follow me!”

Gordo stopped cold.

“Oh yeah, I forgot about them. Well, see you!”

They formed rays in opposing directions. Nigel Braun, the Afrikaner, windmill-waved people through the door.

“Kom om Baas! Kom om Baas Gordian!”

The Wisconsin industrialist followed his orders, tumbling through, followed by Nimec.

The reporter persisted in pointing at the danger, the danger around him, giving narration to the scene.

“Kom die hel om!”

“Try switching languages,” Nimec suggested dryly. Braun did, sounding practically the same with anglicized speech. It did the trick; Geraldo Gutierrez rushed through the door, followed by Braun and another shell impact.

“Well, I’m pumped. We are all facing extraordinary danger here, pummeled by murderous shells-”

“Shut up!” Nimec snapped. “Stop telling us we’re ‘one hair-breadth from death,’

stop saying we're 'living on borrowed time,' just cut it out!"

"Ladies and gentlemen, as you can see, the outpouring of death has provoked these men to the threshold..."

Braun had enough.

"I've had enough," he said, exposing a pistol, "Mister Gordian, I'd like permission to detain the journalist to his living quarters."

Roger curtly approved.

"Granted. I believe he needs a short timeout."

The boss faced the reporter.

"I'm sorry, but you're being a pest."

Geraldo tried protesting.

"But I was only expressing the danger you folks go through regularly. The people have a right to know!"

"We appreciate your enthusiasm, but this is our work, and you're distracting us."

The Situations Room

Nigel trotted in as Roger received a distracted briefing from Paul Evens. The marine stared at the pane of a monitor that displayed the graphic feedback from the UAV, which, in its current configuration, should be called a UCAV (Unmanned Combat Aerial Vehicle), but the general public, and the service using it, for that matter, had barely absorbed the old term when this drone came out.

Evens recounted fire-finding radar results, that the incoming shells were indeed falling from the other side of the Iraq-Iran border.

UpLink's founder collapsed in a chair.

“Please, continue.”

“Sure thing. It’s well out of reach of our own guns, so I’ve taken up the duty of destroying it from the air. I’m on a heading for it right now.”

Pokey Oskaboose sat at a workstation beside Evens. He diverged from his flying long enough to display the radar image of the coming shells.

“See that? They arc nearly twenty miles into the air. At our speed, it will take a few minutes to silence the gun. Evens, what’s our ETA?”

The marine pilot didn’t look over.

“They managed to catch us on the extreme north-south points of our orbit. We’re both fifty miles out. With a true airspeed of 150 MPH, we’re a whole twenty minutes out in a neutral wind. Lucky for me, I’m in still air, but Pokey’s facing an 8 MPH breeze.”

Ahead lay a tripwire, for sure. Everyone in the room expected a consequence, but few paid a care.

Across the Iranian Border

The ducting phenomenon is a term used to describe when a radar signal propagates along the boundary of two dissimilar air masses. The radar ranges with ducted propagation are greatly extended; holes can also appear in the coverage. Ducting occurs when the upper air is exceptionally warm and dry in comparison with the air at the surface. In air defense applications, these “radar skips” can create phantom targets that can show up or disappear instantly.

During normal operation, ground-based radars build up a “clutter map” of the surroundings so that fixed objects, mountains, towers, can be canceled out of the results.

Thus only transient objects, rainclouds, aircraft, geese, are displayed. However, when anomalous returns occur from terrain much more distant, the radar subtracts the close-in clutter map and, naturally, comes up with lots of transient objects displayed as phantom returns.

The duct phenomenon doesn't affect airborne radar units, but too bad for Iran, because they had no AWACS platforms.

Uplink's backdoor into a Coalition E-3 datalink alerted Evens and Pokey that two Dassault Aviation Mirage F1 jets had taken off from the Dezful airbase.

Their 'noses were cold,' meaning their radars were off. Modern active airborne radars by necessity have to be powerful enough to burn through chaff and other countermeasures, or else they must have the computing power to overcome those measures. Most have gone ahead with the brute force method, even though they are now a hazard to living organisms. An E767 has a radar output that could most likely kill a small child, and for these reasons, they are kept off while the jets are on the ground.

Evens and Pokey weren't sure what the safety guidelines were in Iran, but both hoped the jets needed a large layer between them and the ground. They wouldn't have a fighting chance against modern air tactical fighters.

Somewhere around 16,000 feet, Evens' own electronic sniffing package whiffed the emissions of one of the Cyrano IVM radars. He hedged that they couldn't maintain the second one, and said so. When you're sitting at a computer desk, no one minds unnecessary chatter. The datalink was also something not to worry about. To anyone monitoring, the control of the UCAVS looked like a satellite phone conversation. Signals go up to an UpLink bird, then back down to base. They just happened to pass through the drone on the way.

A sudden Doppler change from the radio effects indicated the French jets had changed heading north. The piggybacked AWACS feed confirmed it. The men of the situations room took that to mean they weren't observed.

"The airstrip was hit," droned someone, "it was the little UAV strip."

The crew didn't pay attention.

"That strip was new; a single lousy pothole won't make a difference."

A few miles from target, Evens began making sharp turns, mindful to keep the drone in tiny 'clutter pockets' he could see by imposing a semi-transparent 'clutter map' on his Heads-Up Display.

"You're wasting time," Nimec said pointedly, nervously tapping a tabletop.

"We have plenty of things standing here, but we only have two drones in the air. The UCAVS are more precious than what we have on the surface."

"What we have on the surface are a few good men backing up the sentries," argued Pete Nimec, unmasking his temper.

"So bring them in. The sentry guns can do the job for them." Nimec never expected to hear such from a marine, but this marine isn't typical, he reminded himself.

"I can't. The robotic rifles shorted under the water leak. Evidently, the police forces they were meant for didn't run them through the proving measures the military does."

"And why should they?" Richard Thibodeu interjected. "They aren't called upon to go into military conditions, so they can't justifiably absorb the proving cost."

Evens muttered something about grammar or weight grams. All ignored him.

"I've found the target. It looks like an Iraqi Al Fao artillery piece, except with a second tube welded on. The muzzle just flashed. I'm arming Radar Hellfire. The radar is hot, I'm getting a solid tone... Fox Two."

On the UpLink UCAV, Fox One was rocket fire, Fox Two was the Hellfire missile, and Fox Three was a suicide plow. The craft had no cannon. The missile took roughly six seconds to finish its arc. Paul reeled in some steady footage for impact.

“The cannon’s dead, and I see no point in strafing those guys with rockets.”

He peeled out, catching enough lift to escape small arms. For the thrill of the news crew, the victorious pilot audibly counted from one to fifteen. When nothing exploded, he concluded:

“That confirms the kill.”

The Captain’s Quarters

“We may have gotten off easy. First, that first shell must have been guided in. It temporarily gashed open our water well. Whoever marked the target didn’t know much about wells, to not know about the cutoff valve.

“Second, that shell must have been called in to do double on us- kill the leadership, you and me, and sabotage the well. The person that called the strike knew where we were, and where the well cap was. That’s enough to convince me we’ve been infiltrated.. no shock, really.” Gordian did hire locals, a well-meaning move to improve the team’s image with the people.

“I see more digits.”

Nimec arched both eyebrows.

“On your hand.”

“Right. Something bugs me about them using one cannon to kill us off.”

“They only had one cannon, and they used it like an assassin’s bullet.”

The ex-Ranger tried to fight to his point.

“I know that, but what if the aim wasn’t an assassination plot, or a sabotage of the water drilling process, or either? What I’m saying is, they shorted the robotic rifles, right?”

Roger stirred white cream in his mug.

“Go on.”

“Is that non-dairy?”

“The creamer?”

“The creamer.”

Gordian sighed.

“Ashley’s having a mad cow scare. I tell her neurons can’t enter the milk- unless a sadist does it- and we all know the world has them in stock, but she doesn’t know who to believe. No, this isn’t dairy, even anorexic skim. Help yourself.”

He did, though begrudgingly.

“I can’t even get real food in the Fertile Crescent. Please continue.”

He found his place and sipped from a mug.

“Well, the way this base is located, Tangos can’t really move close to us, unless they’re looking for a close relationship with God immediately.”

“Nice euphemism, but I miss your point.”

“OK, they have to keep their distance and shoot from an extreme standoff range, one we can’t reach-”

“Which they tried, and failed, to do.”

“Yes, they did. Or they can infiltrate the base-”

“Which they did, except their man, it seems, couldn’t smuggle in a weapon.”

“Or they could approach unnoticed.”

“Which they can’t do, because our electro-optical sensors would spot them.”

“Yes, but if a thick liquid shroud masked their approach-”

“The UAVS would spot them... O Lord!”

Nimec sat on Roger’s desk, arms folded.

“That’s right. The sensors couldn’t see through the water spout, and the UAVS rushed straight for Iran’s border. There was a window in which someone could have made an approach, and they may be hiding outside. I’ll have Ricci lead a team to take a look.”

Iran-Iraq Border

Operation: Qiyama

Most were Chechen, some were from Azerbaijan, some from Kazakhstan, and one was Georgian, but all were from former Soviet states, and all were practitioners of Islam, and servants to Vladimir Plenkanov, an officer no longer under suspicion from the west, not after his deed concerning the satellites. The Russian posted the following message on a weblog entry:

“Abhik was here. Now he’s somewhere else, nowhere in particular.”

The corps arrived together on a tug in the Caspian Sea. Although unnecessary, their leader shouted a roll call after disembarking:

“Bashayer, Elham, Nasser, Fatma, Hanouf, Shahad, Eyad, Shaheen, Jibreel, Mika’il, Israfil, Malik-ul-Maut, Ridhwan, Malik, Munkar, Nakir, Zakariya, Ya’qub, and Kufr.”

All were present and prepared to cast their mutual enemy deep into Jahannam. Satisfied, the leader ordered that the Jihadists board the blue bus for a place only known to them as Jinnistan, a base where they planned to redeem the Russian Jinns

that had taken flight from Mesopotamia to Persia twelve years before. Through cunning, the healers, codenamed collectively as “Abhik,” restored the Jinns from decay, ready to be ridden to paradise.

The men, all twenty, including the instructor, had acquired the skills for riding the Jinns with their brothers in the north, where Vladimir, a redeemed infidel, had parted with the working knowledge of the Jinns, and discoursed over what was to pass.

They were to become Qubth-ut-Allah- the Fist of God.

Camp William Eaton

It is said (by Warren Buffet) that the market is like the Lord in that it helps those whom help themselves, but is unlike the Lord in that it does not forgive those whom don't know what they're doing.

Many Private Military Companies (PMC), as they are called, generally hire former Special Forces Officers for grunt work in Iraq. All these men are college-trained, elite, and a money-drain. Roger Gordian followed the same trend at first, but in 2002, Alex Nordstrum and Vince Scull collaborated on a report that suggested UpLink's Private Military Company, Sword, leave the elitist trend, and pick up the “undesirable” noncoms retiring from service. Thomas Ricci gave his endorsement, signing a bold signature, and underlining it. He then scribbled a smiling emoticon.

Soon after, Peter Nimec and Rollie Thibodeau shopped around for Warrant Officers from the Army, and Gunnery Sergeants from the Marine Corps. They'd quickly discovered a splurge of perfectly suitable, perfectly able men, and the odd woman, capable of small-unit leadership equal to that of the elites. Many of them, especially the helicopter crewmen, happened to have all the technical skills previously thought to only be known

to commissioned officers. Some appeared to be savants, others were working on picking up degrees, and most accepted Roger Gordian's pay.

All they needed were directions from a close leadership, so the former Phantom pilot decided to move all the brains from San Jose desks to Camp William Eaton. It was like the Pentagon on the front lines. Perhaps most talented of the NCOs was a marine named Paul Evens, an instructor of Super Cobras, and a freelance linguist. He was a veteran, he'd fought, and he'd killed. He could be counted on, and so could Robin Molina, a Special Forces radioman overlooked because of his prosthetic. He'd be in wheeled or tracked vehicles most of the time, so they'd looked beyond the artificial part of him, and didn't look at him as somehow invalid.

Nigel Braun was just an old Afrikaner. When the government of South Africa banned its citizens from joining mercenary units in 1999, he'd gone home to the Transvald, and bought a lakeside property where poachers abandoned sick monkeys. He'd sharpened his craft interdicting the smugglers. By 2001, bush meat had reached a record high price in Africa, but researchers couldn't deduce why.

Nordstrum and Scull did, and had visited him. The old Boer accepted their offer, and when asked why he'd gone along with the ban, announced he'd still be in the market if he'd kept his contacts, but had somehow disappeared.

Fraser Singe had just walked in, once he figured out what was happening in Sword.

AA

At 1200, Nigel Braun supervised some non-military contractors at installing some backup automated guns, some simple networked platforms modeled on John Underwood's Live-shot webcam rifles fit to tilt/pan servos. Though also not field-tested to

military extremes, all parts survived the trials of the market and were off-the-shelf.

A forklift armored against small-arms motored on above the military crest (above would mean the actual crest) of a berm bisecting an open range. Nigel's supervision came on foot, a good two meters behind the machine. He held an XM8 in a sling, and a straw Stetson cocked on the cranium. Some smoldering pyres still reeked of the fragrance of cordite. From where, he couldn't see. Visibility was obscure at that hour.

An AN/PVS-7B image-intensifying goggle dangled loosely below his stubble-covered chin, waiting for the sun to disappear. Twilight doesn't last long here, it shouldn't take long.

The Bobcat forklift operator deposited the palletted cheap automated weapon, and reversed to the orchestration of the African's hand.

Even without supporting sensory data, Nigel Braun intuitively knew danger stood seconds away.

Inside the Barracks

“Ni you mei you bing dong pi jiu, Onna!”

Push, nudge. Peter Nimec shouted and shoved.

“Snap out of it, Ricci, you're dreaming!”

“...Pi jiu, Onna!”

“You're mixing Firefly fanfiction Mandarin with Anime fanfiction Japanese,” pronounced Gordian's right hand, seeing life flicker in Ricci's eye, “but this is real life, not some recreational fantasy posted on the Internet! Come on.”

Chapter 18

Gordian Hawk

‘In my opinion, there are two kinds of eyes: one kind simply looks at things and the other sees through things to perceive their inner nature.’ –Miyamoto Musashi (As seen on Zenpundit’s blog)

(I’m Assuming he has no relation to Lafayette Musashi)

‘I also think there are prices too high to pay to save the United States. Conscription is one of them. Conscription is slavery, and I don’t think that any people or nation has a right to save itself at the price of slavery for anyone, no matter what name it is called. We have had the draft for twenty years now; I think this is shameful. If a country can’t save itself through the volunteer service of its own free people, then I say: Let the damned thing go down the drain!’ –Robert A. Heinlein, Guest of Honor Speech at the XIXth World Science Fiction Convention, Seattle, 1961

‘Dum vivimus, vivamus!’ — ‘While we live, let us live!’

The chopping rotary soundtrack is gone. Now the sky has only another common industrial racket. Another Vietnam vestige faded away. The paint scheme is different, so is the manufacturer. It still stirs thrilling images, but today's air cavalry has a whole new look, although the traditional counter-insurgency mission continues. The embers of that era faded from the air cav in 1999, when the United States Army fully retired the M60 from the fleet, replacing the old side door armament with tried and true Belgian hardware.

From the Fabrique Nationale plant, air cav's new workhorse belts out Tungsten slugs from the FN M240D 7.62mm medium machine gun, which is coaxial/pintle mounted on both doors of a helicopter produced from a company founded by a brilliant Russian emigrant. An emigrant named Igor Sikorski, an engineer who'd escaped the purges of the Bolsheviks to invent the current rotor/tail-rotor configuration of helicopters in time for the Cold War.

The workhorse Army bird carried the name UH-60, UH being a designation for transport helicopters, widely thought to mean 'utility helicopter,' but normally, military designations aren't that intuitive, so don't stake a game show on it.

It generated lift with the circular motion of a rotary wing comprised of four polymer blades, the blade number accounting for the consistent racket, rather than the rhythmic beat of the two blades of its predecessor.

It was mid April of 2004 when one UH-60 'Black Hawk' jumped into the night time desert sky to serve an arrest warrant for the DOD. One brat cleric had decided to part with the temperate elder clerics, declaring that he held charge of the militia of the Mahdi, the Moslem Messiah, upsetting the region, while foreign fighters corroded the wounds.

Roads were unsafe, but the regional CinC had stamped the intended Landing Zone

(LZ) as safe from the insurgency. At least, safe enough, considering the importance placed in the mission. *Sixty Minutes* had released photographs that had inflamed the youth already sympathetic to Al Sadr's message. The Secretary of Defense had tendered his resignation to the President, who'd turned down the offer in a heartbeat.

While good for internal morale, virtues like loyalty are public relation blunders of the highest degree in Official Washington. These unforeseen political events had all fallen into the mind of Central Command, which had dutifully concocted a scheme to save face on another matter all on their own. They'd decided not to ground the flight for the night, giving the green light for the takeoff of the law enforcement mission.

The flight carried Two NCIS officers, One was a tall photogenic man with dark hair, one was an equally photogenic woman with equally dark hair, and a doughy-looking legal adviser from the Navy JAG office. Was CBS filming a television show?

They commandeered a single UH-60, under command's condition that they drop off a 1,000 gallon belly tank (from the FIREHAWK program) of fresh water to a cut-off burg, still held by a private military company.

In the front seats, the Black Hawk crew pivoted their heads so their AN/PVS-7 night vision goggles could absorb the twilight from the moon and stars. The pilot carefully manipulated stick, rudder, and collective, aiming to fly an average speed of 155 knots at around a thousand meters of elevation, with sudden darts to as high as 193 knots just long enough to get an over-torque warning message. Speed is life.

Lt. Commander Tobias 'Toby' Gairden and Major Lydia 'Rose' Rosencrans, both Navy CIS detectives, kept their eyes averted from one another, instead visually following the movements of the door gunners, military police responsible for their safety.

Chet 'Witness' Charnock, the Judge Advocate General, leaned his head between his

knees, where a barf bag lay.

The detectives heard a muffled report from his lips.

Gairden pretended to take interest in the strobe from an A-10 banking from one end of its racetrack pattern. Even if it meant driving that hog, he'd prefer flying to ground-pounding, thank you. No, solving crimes was the better service. Finding real evidence against true criminals, that was gratifying, nothing like an 'Aviano air show,' being a passive voyeur of ethnic cleansing, as the peacemakers picnic and exchange pleasantries.

No, that era is over, at least for another year. This is hands on. We aren't just a deterrent, a potential energy. We're actually being applied.

The diplomats have stepped away from saying 'nice doggie,' the president is no longer restrained from making the air boys plink meaningless... things. We've come with the stick and baton.

Toby snapped from his reverie. The hog had loosed a flare, another. Light reflected from smoke. A corkscrew of smoke. Snap-turn right, power dive. Over-torque warning, invisible foot in the chest, weightlessness, negative gravity.

The MAG cuts open. The MP loosens the trigger, returns pressure, arcs across the desert.

Gairdon recalls someone calling a MAG barrage a 'Belgian Waffle.'

Ejected casings climb with the negative force... they're softer than- The barf bag! His right hand bats it instinctively away.

"Toby!"

"Rose!"

"Chet!"

"Legal weenies! Shut up!"

The pilot snap-turns again, keeping the tail rotor facing away from the insurgents besieging the village.

Gairdon ducks at a brief glimpse at red tracers.

The Army MP saw it, too.

“Nailed the bad guy! Right? If not, this’ll do it.”

He raked over the source, but Gairdon didn’t look.

“See? I got him!”

He in fact didn’t see, but nodded agreeably.

“Hey, crossfire! We have friends alive in town!”

Indeed, green tracers, looking like neon basketballs through AN/PVS-7 goggles, crossed the town over the desert. The point of origin, Gairdon couldn’t say where. The hull bucked from impacts underneath, then one solid collision.

“Our rotors are fine. We’re fine. Present tense, I stress!”

Fine or not, the door-gunners could only pepper the sand, until walking it across the odd tango. The pilot could steer his course. The lawyer could debate the legality of firing back, but no one felt in charge.

The starboard gunner, a military police Pfc. named Manning, age 19, white, albino features, looked so ‘milky’ people took it as a punchline that his birthplace was Wisconsin, recalled watching a Denzel Washington movie before arriving up country. Strangely, scenes from that Hollywood film flashed by his eyes.

If film scenes are what I remember, does that mean I haven’t lived?

The SAW gunner had thrown a fuel cell from the dustoff-

“Holy Shiite! Legal weenie, throw that fuel cell overboard, and um, woman, ma’am, chase ’em down with-” he clipped a pair of white phosphorus grenades from his harness,

tossed them backhand- “with these Willy Petes.”

“I saw that movie, Private. They used a flare gun.”

“We aren’t in the movie, so tough.”

Toby took charge of the dumping, deciding gray duct tape should conjoin the grenades and the glorified gas can.

“And push!”

Awe, the orange ball of a JP4 gasoline explosion. The warm jet fuel glow reflected off the windshield, offering a possible target for the operator of a Soviet-era .51 AA piece mounted on a Tacoma truck chassis.

“Manning, you meathead, they’re spattering the windshield!” He pitched the nose up, offering the belly in sacrifice.

Toby Gairdon peered under the gunner in time to see a hog spew traditional milk carton-sized slugs in a staggered line several hundred feet away, then suddenly break off, and perform a ‘toss’ of the underbelly payload. Upon release, the A-10 climbed, turning sharply to make a ‘whipping’ toss.

He noticed the big casings ply apart, dispersing sub-munitions, lastly, lingering flames.

“CBU-41. So close to Gordian’s pet village. You know he’ll pout over it,” opined Gairdon, clinching a cigar in his jaws, “but that’s a good demoralizing weapon, I’ll grant the Air Force that.” He struck a match. He puffed on the tobacco thoughtfully, while the pilot found the proscribed LZ in town, a tennis court in the Sheik’s backyard.

“I didn’t know A-rabs played tennis. Maybe only water A-rabs.”

“Private, show some respect! You represent the United States,” Rosencrans corrected, “and they are Marsh Arabs, and allies to boot.”

“Yes, Major, I stand corrected, Major.”

Camp William Eaton

The yanks inside that facility titled their base camp William Eaton, after a Yankee of the same name, who’d been a ringleader of a mercenary adventure during the Age of Reason.

His band had successfully overrun a Libyan port in American actions against North African pirates, who’d harassed shipping in the Mediterranean in that time period.

He’d been a forerunner of sorts, seeing how special agents regularly round up proxy armies to project the politic of their countries to the dark continent since.

Eaton’s band of 500 Arabic and Turk mercenaries had been supplemented by a handful of United States Marines and Eaton himself.

It had been America’s first ground assault against a foreign land, and was a smashing success- although diplomats had hastily signed a peace accord before Eaton and the marine leader, Presley O’Bannon, could march on to the capitol, Tripoli, and install their selected exile into the nation’s leadership.

Eaton, O’Bannon, and the naval commander of a supporting naval squadron, the esteemed Isaac Hull, all returned national heroes, though Eaton remained bitter at President Thomas Jefferson for ‘cutting and running.’

The base name, linked with the name’s historical significance, presented enough information for Major Terrance Arthur Peel- Tap to his mates- to grasp the mind of his adversary.

Peel, forty, recently retired from service with Her Majesty’s Special Air Service, after a dishonorable discharge for brutality against some Irishmen who’d bloody well had it

coming.

He kept a SIG P2020 pistol (diverted from Japanese Self Defense Force supplies) in a Galco conceal-carry paddle holster, Havana Brown finish, over a designer desert tan khaki shirt.

A right-handed shooter, he let the weight sag over his right hip, while keeping watch of Camp William Eaton from under an LCSS light-weight Camouflage Screen some six clicks east of the base.

A stainless steel fiber mesh weaved into the fabric gave the screen a radar scattering characteristic, while it also trapped infrared emissions from bleeding out of the concealed area.

Peel and his men had used the desert variation, which came with a desert camouflage pattern. They all had sand and light green face paint applied on their faces, dark in shiny places, light in shadowy places, and lay crouched where a short artillery shell had kick-started their entrenching efforts.

They wore the outmoded six-colour battle dress fatigues of US servicemen from Desert Storm, bought from a surplus outlet in Kuwait.

He intently studied the effects of the Al Fao bombardment against base targets, using an image intensifying binocular marketed all over the globe, and his study alarmed him.

“Balls, the yanks have a Shortstop on base.” Proximity fuses detonated hundreds of feet ahead of their proscribed points, a fact their designated observer wasn’t reporting back.

“Bloody frickin’ balls! The arty ’as only half the softening task done! That shepherd boy git doesn’t have the brains to tell us impact fuses ’ould work better, eh? Tell me, our spook teacher did school the kid, right?”

Peel's aide-de-camp shrugged.

"He doubtlessly didn't see it fit for the abbreviated curriculum, Tap."

Peel scowled. Not at his aide, but at the predicament.

"We're on a time line. Ruzhyo has the Southern Army's balls crossed at the moment, but we don't have time to dandy about."

"Agreed, Sir. We are T minus two minutes right... now."

Camp William Eaton (inside)

Thomas Ricci, the camp's Security Chief, suited up at the urging of the Intel Chief, Peter Nimec. Both men pulled their XM8 rifles, adopted on William Eaton to 20" barrels, for use on their Intel tour. Both men felt comfortable the XM8 would soon be the M8, an approved weapon for military use.

It looked like a beige squirt gun with a red dot scope, but the new rifle could do some serious damage, especially since Sword had up-armed the weapons.

With a slight modification of the bolt facing, Molina, the SOF guy, and Ricci had managed to up the XM8 cartridge capacity to the new 6.8x43mm SPC (Special Purpose Cartridge) Remington 115-grain round. On the range, Molina had demonstrated the upped XM8 could nail targets with one MOA accuracy from 600 yards, perfect for the open desert environment.

Because Sword was a non-government organization, it wasn't necessarily subject to treaties forbidding the use of expanding, exploding, or fragmenting small arms, so Ricci and Nimec weren't shy about mixing some Hollowpoint hunting rounds into the mix of their 100-round transparent magazines.

"Dang! A servo froze!" As The two chiefs walked toward the exit, they took in the

pained cries of their comrades, men who bravely manned consoles for right and freedom.

Richard Thibodeau stepped in to help.

“No need to MacGyverize, buddy, just try to tweak it out,” said the Cajun, before turning an eye toward the other chiefs.

“Yo! You guys stepping out?”

“Yeah.”

“Braun’s guys just took a lick from a beehive round. Remember those?”

“Yeah.”

“One of his Arabs got nailed down by one: sucking chest, lots of gushing wounds. They’re pulling back without him-”

“Roger,” Ricci interrupted, “We can drag him out, or failing that...”

“Gotcha. Braun should be at the door any second. And oh yeah, the Shortstop is fouling every other arty incoming, but Braun says they have a forward observer.”

Nimec’s eyes narrowed.

“How does he know?”

“The shells are chasing them. By-the-way, the shanty is under siege. Luckily, they’re in our arty ranger, at least the northern ring. That side is starting to lighten up, after a pounding. Our BK amputee (Molina) is holed up there, and reports some legal weenies have dropped in for ‘help’ (said contemptuously). They carried some water in, at least, so they can hang out a long siege. OK, that’s your briefing, now get going!”

Both parted. Nimec strapped his Fritz on snugly, installed insurance to eyes and ears, and led the charge.

“I’m getting some ghostly EM. Someone’s out there. I’ll try dialing it in.”

A tech, who’d shouted out to everyone, caught their attention. They saw him rewind

a digital tape, play it back, and try again.

“I’ll have it in time.”

“Bingo! I shook the servo back into service! High-five?”

No one paid attention.

Outside

They both perceived the world through their AN/PVS-7 goggles, seeing a green world. Before slipping the goggles on, Pete Nimec had panned a naked view of the horizon, awe-struck by how BIG the sky looked without the normal obstructions, like trees and man-made edifices, that block out much of the sky in America. Normally, when in the United States, one has to be on the coast or a farm/ranch to see something like this, if one doesn’t live in the western deserts.

A big sky, Nimec reasoned, could explain why the perspective of these people was different. Pulling from the reverie, he followed Ricci’s lead. Nigel Braun met them. Normally a smiling individual, he looked more stern than ever. That was when Nimec heard the raspy gasping.

“That’s my man. We call him Jamal, though he was born Mohamed. He’s nailed tightly, so much we couldn’t move him before the arty started up again. We’ve been moving to keep it away. Stay concealed, while we decoy the shells.”

“Roger. He’s over that berm?” Ricci pointed.

“Right, Mate. I’ll bein’ seeing ya’.”

Nimec and Ricci dropped prostrate, heaved forward with elbows and feet. Another shell zoomed in, showering shrapnel from a premature point. Camp Eaton’s own guns joined in a volley on a distant point. They froze as someone kicked some tracers over

their heads.

“What’s that!”

Nimec rolled over, eyes prowling. It had come from Braun.

“Nigel’s shooting tracers. Is he ruining someone’s night vision?”

Ricci concurred.

“Yeah. He doesn’t want the spotter to indicate us. Smart.”

They moved on, taking comfort in the tactic.

Above

“Ok VF-135, kick the tires, light the fires, select Zone 5, tag the bogey, but don’t get in a furball. Don’t boresight, check six, and bingo to Mom. Roger?”

“Two.”

The aviators of John C. Stennis didn’t expect a chance of a dogfight over Iraq this late in the war, but some spooky stuff had violated Iraqi airspace from Iran, and they looked like multiple bandits.

“Cat’s Eye, my feet are just now wet, and I need a Texaco. Am I seriously expected to make the intercept?”

“Affirmative, Lead. Don’t get beaded up on me. You aren’t bingo, so approach Zone 5 now, or expect to have your wings clipped later. Understood?”

“Gotcha, Cat’s Eye. Following your indication. Where’s the Air Force?”

The RIO: “Whiskey Charlie? (Who cares?)”

Pilot: “We do have people in Baghdad, right?”

Cat’s Eye: “Lead, stop acting like a nugget, and make the intercept!”

Pilot: “I am!”

Radar Intercept Officer: “Nose hot. Got a Judy. I’m padlocked!”

Pilot: “Attention, flight, the sniffer’s getting some bright music (modern jamming).”

RIO: “We have a warm and fuzzy solution, regardless. Do the ROE (Rules of Engagement) allow for a shoot-down?”

Cat’s Eye: “(stuttering) Lead, one’s already hit the Green Zone. The Kurdish Socialist Party Headquarters are burning.”

RIO: “(Expletive) Firm tone for the AIM-54. Target signature matches late-model MIG design.”

Pilot: “Roger. (Sigh) Phoenix away.”

Cat’s Eye: “Splash one, lead.”

Camp William Eaton

Thomas Ricci found the source of the infernal wheezing, a collection of blood and pus that answered to the name Jamal.

The Italian pulled out a nail that had performed a crude tracheotomy, the likely source of the wheezing. He reached down one shirt pocket, brought out a ring of masking tape, and applied it over the hole.

“Hi Jamal. This is Ricci. I’ll bring you in.” Tom felt short of breath, yet managed to operate. He managed to siphon fluid from the sucking chest wound, then work a loop of tape around the Arab.

The former SEAL and Boston cop then worked an entrenching tool under the Arab, setting his Fritz underneath, and applied the magical force of a GI lever-and-fulcrum.

“AH!”

Ricci smiled.

“That groaning sound is actually a good thing, soldier. It means you’re uprooted! Holy-”

Leaving ‘Jinnistan’

Bashayer plunged to martyrdom, casting a broad stroke of flame across the protected keep of the infidel. Qubth-ut-Allah had arrived. Malik could scarcely believe his joy.

He launched the flames of Jahannam. Jahannam! Jahannam! As an outlet, he chanted the word. “Infidels! I plunge you to Jahannam! You did not know of this Jahannam? Do you know of burning blisters? Would you consider them bliss? You will, after your stay in the pits of Jahannam!

Praise onto these Jinns, which give us power to raise the righteous will against you demons!”

Camp William Eaton (Inside)

“Crap! We have a fire-fight! Look at that!”

A symphony of light brushed a pallor over all CCTV screens projecting sensory input for sentry guns.

Techs and administrators shouted oaths as events unfolded.

“E4 sentry tower destroyed!”

“Smoke trails!”

“Fire-finding radar indicates rockets incoming!”

Pokey’sUCAV had just ‘lazed’ the Al Fao piece, when he jinked from incoming SA-13 ‘Gopher’ missiles.

“SAM hit me! I’m dead meat!”

Paul Evens, flying right behind him, amended the story for the better.

“He fired a Radar Hellfire, and I caught it with my data-link. I’m homing it in. Splash one artillery piece.”

Roger Gordian regarded Evens blankly, his mouth agape.

“I didn’t know you could do that!”

Evens shrugged.

“I’m a marine, I can do anything. Seeding flares. I’m on a terminal dive at the Gopher. Luckily, it didn’t see me. Arming Radar Hellfire... I have a tone... SA-13 missiles took a snap-shot... I cut power, stalled. They’re too late, for the Hellfire’s punched them. OK, I’m issuing over-torque on the engine. Good wing geometry. Extending flaps... I have lift, and the missiles- where are they? Aw, they’re holed in the sand. I’m out of missiles, so I’m coming back for a refit.”

Roger Gordian was floored. A marine helo pilot simply couldn’t perform that feat. Hell’s Bells, a Navy top gun can’t be sure he’s made of that stuff. Paul Evens wasn’t just the right stuff, he was at the right hand of the right stuff god!

“Um, I’m making sense of a low EM reading,” announced a tech, pricking Paul’s ear.

The ex-marine slowly absorbed the sensory input of a row of sentry-gunner consoles as the tech recited his best guess of what the radio broadcast meant.

“Um, uh, that-was-close-to-my-arse, you... imbecile! Adjust 1-”

Paul’s eyes focused on one sentry screen, where on one edge, a shell impact-detonated next to a remaining sentry tower.

Hand to his kukri’s sheath, he pounced from the chair, pumped one leg before the other.

“Evens-”

“Take the plane!”

Gordian saw the UCAV barrel toward the desert, so he plopped in the vacated chair. Thibodeau witnessed the scene, and raised a halting hand.

Evens leaped, planted one striking foot on Richard’s shoulder, and followed through on the power kick.

Rollie tumbled clear, leaving a vacuum for Evens to rush past.

“Come back!”

The news crew fed off the energy, gave pursuit.

“Catch him!” Geraldo meant “film him!” And they did, seeing him sprint into a firestorm, ascend multiple rungs of the tower ladder, and vault into the cramped shack, knife first, against Lord-knew-what.

The camera zoomed in on a volley of savage strikes, menacing, abstract. They knew not what he clawed and punctured at, nor knew what plunged the tower’s height in retreat.

“Focus! Viewers, I apologize for what you see. I-I can’t fathom what that is, I see a savage, brutal gash on the victim’s eye socket; That bone on the temple was smashed in... omigod! The eye is gone! Blood, gray matter, white fluid is-”

Earth shook. Tracers consumed the camera. Staccato drums hammered the audio. At the crescendo, Geraldo collapsed from vertigo.

The marine sprinted back, sheathing his bloody, sticky Nepalese knife. I booted the reporter in one shoulder, miraculously flinging him back into the bunker, before falling behind him.

“Mister Gordian, the forward observer is cancelled.”

Vince Scull stared at the ex-marine with his bloodshot basset hound eyes.

“Who was it?”

“The Sheik’s oldest son.”

Chapter 19

Terminus Ad Quem

A Toast to the Guns

'By them we live,
For them we would die.
Whatever the Mission,
We'll give it a try.
We'll serve them with Honor
For they are the ones;
That make us Artillerymen,
So here's to the Guns:
TO THE GUNS!
-Unknown

“See...minus...one...”

Peel diverged his optics away from the corpse. The infiltrated observer was dead, but he'd stuck to his job, even if he botched it a tad.

He softened things, and it was high time to test how well by initiating the engagement. "Sappers forward!"

Peel tilted his view down at the snaking attachments of several Bangalore Torpedoes approaching the base's thick outer berm. Near the source of the snaking tubes, Peel saw the nervous fidgeting of the cheap mercs with the Chicom (Chinese Communist) Claymore clackers. The sappers gestured 'ready.'

This was where the stomach acid nearly doubled him over. They'd rehearsed this, but if the attack wasn't TOT (Time On Target), he feared they wouldn't have the shock value to win.

One last time, Peel glanced at his LCD stopwatch, turned left to his aide, and gave an order to be relayed.

"Yes Sir. Attack orders T-minus 30. Set stopwatch. Fire on command."

The order passed through the ranks.

A full 2/3rd the way behind Peel's FLOT (Forward Line Of Troops), a quintet of Denel G6 tubed guns, upgraded with techno-thrilling Denel G6-52 extras, poured a Patmos nightmare out. Multiple rounds (six) lobbed from each gun in one rapid sequence, variously propelled to impact simultaneously on the same target by means of the G6-52's advanced AS2000 artillery target engagement system.

By way of a 'variable volume chamber,' the first shell was fired with the maximum powder charge at an extremely high trajectory for a deep arc time, with subsequent shells yielding less powder and shallower arcs. All this made a highly advanced TOT possible, changing 'hang times' so all rounds would land simultaneously. Think an

artillerist-conducted shock and awe.

As the descent continued, Peel heard his aide shouting for the strela missile teams to reenact a tactic developed by a warrior named Archer during the long struggle against Soviets.

“Sappers! Execute!” As he wished, the Bangalore charges collapsed a wave of sand gradients after tripping the base’s defensive charges. Exhaust trails progressed westward betwixt lazy air molecules, hungry for the thermal bleeding emanating from the manned towers, where space heaters kneaded heat against chilled bodies.

In the Base

Jamal’s limp head flopped about as Ricci fireman-carried him over the berm.

“Rub al Khali” he murmured, seeing the west. Spooked by an absurdly punctuated pulse, Ricci chucked the Iraqi to Nimec, and face-planted into a gravel patch.

“What’d he say?”

“Behold, our open fly.”

Ricci braved a sighting.

“Yeah, we’re open over there. Here they come.”

He’d anticipated the cinematic view of the rushing Arabian zealot in the flowing mishlah¹ and duct-taped AK with the banana clip, checkered martyr scarf weaved around his face, but the former SeaAirLand operative took in a different picture; Gulf War veterans, almost, reasonably fit men in mottled tan clothing- Desert Storm patterns!- and better Kalashnikovs with orange magazines.

Then they disappeared from Ricci’s elevated view, behind one tiny line, a puny berm

¹mishlah: Arabian robe or cloak. It comes in black, brown or cream

passing as the last obstruction to their way in. Local charges detonated, generating points of entry. Ricci lined up his dot.

The decelerator pad pressed hard on the meat of his shoulder. Tom followed the ballistic track, saw it enter a sapper's Gulf War 6-shade jacket, trade speed for brute energy, lifting him in a backward somersault. Out the other side of the ribcage, with plenty of energy to continue flight. The impact and exit caused great lacerations on both sides of the ribcage. Sheared bone opened the lung, creating entryways for fluid.

"Pete, the gun will do." Rub al Khali, 'The Empty Quarter'. The name of a bleak void of a desert waste that comprises the southeastern part of Saudi Arabia. In this context, Nimec's translation was correct.

Alongside Highway #7, Southern Iraq

Vladimir Plekhanov labeled it Al Qadi² but in law enforcement and military circles, it was a HERF- High Energy Radio Frequency- gun, an improvised electronic gun used for crashing electronic systems. Seeing it as a homemade weapon, Mikhail Ruzhyo didn't have complete faith in the gun's utility. Even so, little risk existed in firing the device. It wasn't really much more than a Tesla coil attached to a battery, but it could do something the insurgents couldn't do regularly; stop a coalition vehicle. He cut the powerful Warrior Infantry Fighting Vehicle with the static blast of Nikola Tesla's electric howitzer, fusing the Warrior's silicon grids together, electrically killing the armored beast. That didn't stop the single L21 Rarden cannon.

Gospel, Scimitar, Strelok, Job Geroj, and Zemya ducked behind the dune with him. True to his name, Geroj instantly popped back up to impose his M72's radioluminescent

²Qadi: Arabic word for 'judge'

white cross hair over the vehicle. Firing at over 200 meters, it was quite a low-percentage shot for such a high risk, but then again, that's why they call him the hero.

Though Iraq's deserts were littered with enough radiological waste, Geroj cast the LAW, along with the promethium-147-illuminated sighting device, aside in the sand. Ruzhyo honed his senses, which indicated a buff report.

"I'm no Mufti,³ but you hit metal, comrade hero." The Rifle cornered the dune, eyed soot emitting from the armoured vehicle. His scope probed for the gunner. The Johnny had ducked, but the beige helmet remained prone to the cross-hairs. The duel burst left two holes, but only one entry wound. Mikhayl diligently trained his tool above the Warrior as he called for Zemya to sight the exit ramp and Strelok to cover the road to the south.

"Scimitar, Gospel, terminate the survivors, and Geroj, set the parallel ambush, STAT."

The Sky Above Baghdad

Doubtlessly the infidel had the believers exiled from the wonderful edifice of power, while they lazily rested in command of Allah's comfortable majlis.⁴ Those were provided for the exclusive utility of Islam! The followers in the South aren't uprising as they should! They should angrily push the fight for their birthright, but instead, they lounge around listening to Cheb Mami wail sin on Radio Al Sawa Basra - 107.0 FM. Revolting stuff! But no longer; the Jinns are falling!

But the twenty suicide pilots weren't actually flying genies from a mythical land,

³mufti A Muslim cleric or legal expert. Authorized to render opinions on religious matters

⁴majlis: Arabic reception or sitting room

they piloted Russian technology. MiGs from type 29 down to 21, machines left in the boneyards of Iran, not fit to fly until a Russian oligarch refurbished the machines with parts shipped from the Russian kleptocracy. Their measure of success relied on their ability to dash across the border on a one-way race toward stationary ground targets. By flying a one-way suicide mission, the supersonic jets could maintain after-burning power for the duration. They didn't need a 'Texaco,' a flying gas station, and they didn't need authorization. They didn't even need to track moving targets, or worry about civilians.

All they needed was a few more seconds before an intercept.

VF-135 MiG CAP

"Warm and fuzzy solution, fox 3," another kill, "stick a fork in me, Cat's Eye, we're done here."

The VF-135 naval aviator banked East, running home. He'd expended his missile supply, but in the process, became America's first fighter ace (with the exception of Bronco Winters) since Vietnam. Still, it didn't feel right, removing oneself from battle as it's still hot. Both F-14 crewmen gazed longingly at what they left, seeing the strobes of a desperate swarm of Apache gunships climb at the shooting stars. Tracers and hellfires jumped from the strobes, arcing and climbing, sloping and colliding.

In a schoolyard, an Avenger unit joined in, saving the Green Zone from catastrophic explosions, but scattering debris anyway. The .50 caliber M3P guns of the Avenger preceded the purge of Stinger missiles. By then, all the kamikazes were in their terminal phase.

When the fifty's staccato report ended, the MiGs Saddam had shipped to Iran had sparked Jahannam, Hell, in his capitol.

Chapter 20

The Chechen Idoru

‘What we do in life echoes in eternity.’ –Maximus, in *Gladiator*

‘Oh, yes, and one more thing, dear Lord, about our enemies, ignore their heathen prayers and help us blow those little bastards straight to hell. Amen.’ –Lt. Colonel Hal Moore, in *We Were Soldiers*

IN a dried canal of Southern Iraq, Vladimir Plenkanov’s small task force sucked a British task-force into a parallel ambush, in the hope of further locking Camp William Eaton in vacuo of all possible assistance from coalition allies. The hero and the Snake lay at opposing ends of the road, Claymore clackers in one hand, AK rifles in the other, both prone as Zemya’s name-sake.

The problem with British rapid-reaction forces in Iraq is that they refuse to move

without Challenger tanks leading the way. With the United States really pressed for allies, the CentCom Chief just has to deal with this temperament, even though the tanks slow down British reactions. All this suited Mikhail just fine. He'd run track against the sluggish Brits, while the MIGs burned the Yanks.

Rifle broke up his shape perfectly, slipping the upper body of his sandy Ghillie suit neatly into the broken crest of the canal, and letting his legs hang over the lip. He wrapped his Abakan in a desert shawl mottled with grease and dried brush. He clutched the safety in the trigger guard, set to fire, and turned the rear diopter for extreme distance shooting.

Scimitar and Gospel huddled below him, prepared to follow orders. Ruzhyo didn't feel like talking to them, which didn't surprise anyone. At the rendezvous, the smashed-up little hogan in the wilderness, he'd washed up his body and gear in an aluminum tub while Strelok entertained the men with his new favorite movie, *Enemy At The Gates*, on a portable DVD player, a frivolous addition to the operation budget.

Peter had enjoyed the cut scene at the docks, where Zeitsev talked to the political officer about just why his shooting was so accurate. It had been because being such poor rezidents of kolkhoz (farms) that they'd been, they'd needed the pelts of the wolves they shot intact, and one bullet through a pelt would ruin their value. That left the poor boy's grandfather only one solution; shoot the wolves through the eyes. He'd learned how, and taught his grandson.

Peter had to watch that thrice, and certain chapters in the tank factory a second time, while Grigory the Snake played the movie's one sex scene on a certain AB length a dozen times.

"Zemya, how shamelessly nekulturny an officer you've become, ogling at two English

actors boffing under sheets, rather than studying Vassili and Konig practice brilliant fieldcraft. This movie, it is Tom Clancy stuff, no?”

Strelok distractedly corrected him. “No, surprisingly, others in the West are gaining an understanding of us. A Frenchman named Annaud wrote and directed the film, a reason I’m watching the French audio.”

“The other reason,” Ruzhyo surmised, “is that French has become your language of sniping since reading and watching *Chacal* (Jackal)”

“Qui, Comrade Rifle. That novel set a standard met by others, but not quite surpassed, to my mind.”

Another reason, a secret reason, The Rifle knew, was that Strelock needed the fluency in French if or when these operations against American interests put him on a worldwide terrorist watch list. Since Panama, Americans seemed crazy enough to invade nations just to capture individuals that crossed them, to the point of labeling them with first names. Names like Abu, Pablo, Manuel, Saddam, Osama, and Slobadon. Of these, Abu (Nidal) died in Iraqi custody circa 2002 for reasons unknown. Perhaps the ground war had begun earlier than the public thought it did. Pablo (Escobar) was officially gunned down by Columbian police, but maybe not. Manuel (Noriega) is in Leavenworth Prison. Saddam (Hussein) is in a “secret” prison, and Slobadon (Milosevic) is in the custody of the United Nations. Only UBL has avoided death or capture, but the search is seemingly infinite, and Strelock doesn’t wish to become “Peter” to American authorities. With such a track record since 1989, Mikhail wondered how any American could consider his government soft on crime. *They’re nuts! We should let them prowl Russia, then they’ll see what ‘soft on crime’ really means! They’d have to take Putin away... and collar those even higher!*

I can understand your willingness to drop into the French Foreign Legion, friend, but not even they may be capable of protecting you.

Ruzhyo escaped from his reverie seconds before the lead tank passed the Hero and the Snake. Both remained disciplined enough to refrain from triggering too fast. Sadly, the Brits had buttoned up tightly, thieving Peter the Shooter an occasion to snipe a crew member. No matter, Ruzhyo let his AN-94 rest, opting for Tesla's HERF gun, which still had enough charge. A Challenger dragged a stiff hide, but not a hide specifically designed to block electronic energy, and Mikhail the Rifle knew just where to shoot, through the tiny view port where the driver sat.

Mikhail didn't see the electric energy, and the driver certainly didn't perceive, until maybe when it passed through his eyes. Maybe it stimulated spontaneous responses in that electro-chemical processor the human brain, setting off wild discharges that made his hands quiver, weakening his command of the yoke that steered the vehicle. Ruzhyo looked for signs of erratic swerving, but the vehicle only slowed down. Stopped. The High-Electric-Radio-Frequency beam must have raced beyond the positronic signals between the driver's ears into the piston diesel engine, killing all electric activity. The Challenger 2 has died.

He snapped to the Warrior Infantry Fighting Vehicle, almost prayed the HERF's 'battery' had the charge to pierce the hull, fired low by the bottom tread, a hopeful thin spot in the Armour. It stopped. Ruzhyo read the battery indicator. The gun was truly dead. Tossing it aside, he clicked his radio once, causing enough squelch to signal Zemya and Giroj that they were to hit the next car.

Three pulled on the clackers, and the Chicom Claymores pummeled forth some 5000 ball bearings at opposing ends of the roadside, angled so Snake and Hero aren't aiming

at one another. They managed to catch two armoured UK Range Rovers in the crossfire, making colanders of both cars.

A Challenger immobile on one side, and two Range Rovers demolished on the other, several unarmored SUVs lay trapped in the middle. All six ambushers plinked the windows, spewing fragile shrapnel into cloth and skin, instantly causing the superficial wounds they plan to compound later. Four doors opened on each vehicle, a dismounted war-fighter behind each. Their SA-80s held over the lip of each door.

“Guys,” the Chechen radioed, “grenade them.” Though preplanned, someone may have forgotten. Ruzhyo almost heard the clicks of switches as every underbarrel launcher came on-line. They did as rehearsed, thudding contact-fused GP-30 bombs off thin doors, immolating the British.

“All of a sudden, the American Revolution doesn’t seem such a big deal,” opined the Hero.

“Cut the chatter. Dismounted infantry is coming in a skirmish line. Stay low and pin them.”

The Rifle pocketed his radio, clutched his Abakan in the right hand, and slid into the canal. The soldiers were several hundred yards to the right, and he needed to move directly parallel to them. Another rescue dispatch was on the way, so he had no time to lose. He slapped Gospel and Scimitar across their shoulders.

“You,” he screamed at Gospel, “down the trench! Run, count to ten, then check for Brits! Leap-frog your way there,” he pointed, “where we’ll flank. Move!” He sprinted fully, as they alternately followed.

In the mix, Grigory Zemya and Job Giroj alternately pumped 60-round AK clips and GP-30 rifle grenades from prone positions, briefly thankful to have the immediate

advantage of defense in a small-arms exchange. Tracers shot out from their AKs with every trigger pull, lancing red frozen ropes at the British. Job quickly depleted his 60-tracer magazine, Grigory followed a beat slower, both aimed hurriedly, frightening the beBuddha out of the lunging and wilting UK advance.

They simultaneously lobbed illuminating Willy Pete 'see shells' from their underbarrel mounts, blinding them well enough for Giroj to bolt in their fire-and-maneuver. The Snake fanned half his mag at full automatic, putting the Britons in a fearful crouch, then slapping to semiauto and leveling for judicious shots.

Before running dry, he heard the Hero belt an underbelly and rifle grenade at the Anglo mass, chunk a hand frag, and duck under the slow reaction of a harassed unit.

Zemya sniffed, noting the only burned propellant in his nostrils was Russian. On that chipper note, he grinned while sticking the reserve Claymore at his fore, and triple-pulling the clacker.

Whoosh!

At sixty degrees, five-thousand steel balls arced over a wide footprint, leaving an impression filled with exposed infantry. The Russian whooped, pumping one fist as Mikhail the Rifle nose-dived into the bleeding group. Mission accomplished, the Snake oscillated his head on several axes, found Strelock crashing a barrier between the Snake and the Britons with the L21 Rarden cannon of a marooned Warrior vehicle.

As the Shooter's eyes met the Snake's, he motioned him to slither to the armor. The prostrate snake did so, allowing Peter to rake the wake of the snake as cover.

"Come on!"

He found his footing and stride, not looking back. Ricochets 'saulted off the APC, on the tread, in the sand. They aimed for the key gunner, the lone machine-gunner, as

they always did.

They're still fighting, he marveled, steering behind the hulk. He scouted for Gospel and Scimitar. They were redeploying from their tandem efficacious flank assault with Mikhail.

Job the Hero withdrew when the boys reached their leap's end to cover him. Mikhail lay cloistered, Grigory knew not exactly where.

Peter Strelock plunged from the machine gun and shouldered his Dragunov rifle, pounding the APC with his left hand.

"Fall back, the assault's over!" He repeated the call until Zemya sprinted in the canal. The remaining five of their band followed.

He was a Chechen sodden of concocted blood, decked in a forged uniform, contorted in the ways of war dead, the agent trained in the ways of wet operations by the Spetznez, appeared just as all the fallen British infantry did, down to the service patches. He cradled an SA-80, forsaking his Abakan¹ to a different patch of dying Britons. He cried out in the tone of an Englishman. His pleas for a medic had him dragged to the rear, hauled to a Land Rover marked with the red cross.

The field crew wrestled him to the table inside, where they cut open his fabrication. The battle dress open, the medic began stanching the blood flow. A private slammed the rear door shut, and Ruzhyo² felt the vehicle move.

"Stay calm, bloke, and thank the maker those turds didn't frag your arse," soothed the field medic, as he swathed a cotton patch where Ruzhyo's Fairburn³ knife had slit

¹ Abakan is a small Russian village where the AN-94 assault rifle won trials to replace the AK-74

² His name means 'rifle' in Russian. He's a character from Tom Clancy and Steve Pieczenik's Net force

³The Fairburn Knife was invented by the co-founder of the Gates-Fairburn style of martial arts now

his forehead.

“That dribbles into the bloody eyes, giving chaps the fright, and it looks bad, too, from the outside. You’ll be a plum shortly. There.”

Vision cleared, Ruzhyo tilted his head, found the orderly, the driver, and an armed escort.

They hadn’t found his piece, concealed at the small of his back. He had no wounds there, nor did he complain of any in that region, so they’d overlooked it. It cost them.

The doc leaned toward his med kit, reaching for additional bandages. The orderly rocked both his hands behind his back, and the men in the front seat gazed on at the surrounding world. They didn’t notice their patient slide one hand under his back, unsafe a tiny .25 Strayer Voigt Infinity⁴, he turned it under his body, and they didn’t see the spot emitting from the pen light taped underneath. It crawled up the nape of the doc’s neck, sighting for the shooter.

Firing from behind his back, Ruzhyo suffused a .25 duo at spine and hind brain, killing the medic. Internal pistons silenced the rounds, making no sound to jolt the orderly before the light bathed his crotch and throat. The armed escort turned, unable to retract his sub gun from the window before his temple imploded, and his eye contracted behind a bullet.

The driver’s hand, conforming around a Browning pistol winced as the Chechen’s boot crushed his carpal bones, and gasped when the Strayer’s muzzle brushed his temple.

Headbutt.

practiced by the Shanghai police

⁴This sort of pistol can be ordered with a custom layout. Faye Valentine carried such a gun in the Cowboy Bebop movie

It came too late.

Mikhail triggered on the Brit's cheekbone, dispatching him a second slower, louder, uglier. Angered, the assassin roughly manhandled him to the operating table, hearing the resonance of a biological snap as he twisted the body.

He grunted, fought for the vehicle's wheel, careful not to sharply bank it. Half seated, Ruzhyo drove his foot to the gas. Another party drove in. He swerved back to his lane, mindful his automobile was British, and not the American Ford Explorer he'd driven in Maryland, with the driver on the wrong side.

Crud, I'm shirtless. The rear-echelon convoy didn't notice, it seemed, for the Chechen didn't notice a deviation in the convoy's route.

Although he deemed alertness a pivotal asset, he mulled over the last engagement...

Tunnel vision shuts out the periphery, and a firefight sucks one's eyes into tunnel vision. Such is the tenuous hope of a Spetznez officer when infiltrating the enemy. In defense, you have to keep your eyes wide open, not easy when staring at death whiz at you in excess of 500 feet per second 800 rounds per second. Think of playground balls. The toughest kids, little leaguers, they bolt out four-seam fastballs matching the velocity of traffic in open areas. Say one aims at your head. You're ducking, flinching, or your head may become fractured.

Maybe you're more athletically gifted than that, maybe you actually comprehend what your coach is saying as he demands for your eyes to follow the ball. You can focus on the task, and three at-bats out of ten, you get a hit. You can hit a fist-sized ball traveling as fast as a car, as long as the pitcher keeps it between your knees and shoulders, and within reach of your bat. But you lose sense of most everything else, focusing on smacking an incoming projectile into a large field of grass.

Now imagine that ball is reduced to the aperture of a hole punched in paper by your little finger. That hole measures about five point five six millimetres. It isn't a nylon core wrapped in yarn and covered in stitched cowhide anymore, it has... eh... a tungsten carbide core- that's a metal with twice the density of lead. The projectile is no longer powered by the contractions of a boy's muscles, but the exothermal reaction of saltpetre sulfur, and charcoal, or a more modern mix.

You ducked and flinched at the toy thrown by a kid before. Now you're expected to confront this! And it isn't just one. Your CO thought there were a minimum of twenty people aiming these at you, and expected you- bloody grunt!- to advance against this. And you do, although henpecked by kids throwing toys at you, you brave bullets when your CO mandates that your pals are behind those shooters, distressed, praying for your rescue.

So, amazingly, you perform the stupidest feat performed by generations, you stare down death, and march toward it, you dimwitted teat-sucking git! Yeah, your eyes are open, but it's above-and-beyond to keep them wide open. Besides, you can't be the superhero in the lot, surely someone better than you, older than you, is keeping his eye on the bigger picture.

News flash, your EL-TEE, the old man, only differs from you by a few years, if at all. He wasn't in Desert Storm, and he may have never served in Kosovo. So he's barely different from you, when the cordite wafts the air. Maybe Sarge has his eyes wide, he's a lifer! Sarge is a reservist who flipped burgers for a few pounds each day at a greasy joint before rotating in a month ago. Besides, he's babysitting you, or pleading for CAS from your estranged winged brethren.

No one is watching the fringes.

Ruzhyo peddled clear of the canal, did a once-over at Gospel and Scimitar. They're a few steps behind. No one's watching, but he crouches uncomfortably, finds subtle eccentricities in the terrain, masking behind them. You don't have a human shape, Ruzhyo; the ghillie⁵ suit still flutters on your back, so only your movement truly stands out.

One hundred metres to go, you attempt sighting with the rifle. Your running has a rhythm, one you've learned to shoot from before. It's not so different from horseback archery, and at this range, you have to silence the spotters and pounce the pile, fast.

Full auto, both feet planted widely, you, a man accustomed to capping the iris in combat, have to plink six-foot bodies with automatic bursts. With an avtomat⁶.

You, Mikhail Ruzhyo, you fully exploit the 1800 RPM rate in short bursts. Shortly it devolves to point-and-click combat range, below 25 meters, and by reflex, you shut all their eyes, and nose-dive from view in a chicken-scratch of a foxhole, soaked garnet, scented copper. Your rifle flails on a divergent path, bayonet protruding forward, along with a grenade you loosed.

You're just another one of the wounded now, Mikhail Ruzhyo. You can dispense with the *nom de guerre*⁷ now. And remember to cut your forehead with that grenade pin before the medic shows. You can still fail by neglecting to polish your acting skills. People are still talking about *The Phantom Menace*, you know.

⁵A ghillie suit is basically a bunch of rags worn by snipers. The intent is to break up the shape of a human being

⁶'Automatic' in Russian

⁷'Name of War' in French, but you probably knew that

Caucasus Mountains

'A man makes a picture
A moving picture
Through the light projected
He can see himself up close
A man captures colour
A man likes to stare
He turns his money into light to look for her' -U2, Lemon

He'd indulged in a luxurious Czarist-era Pullman carriage on his way to the Elbrus Mountain area, riding in seat number 26. He arrived from the depot in Mineralnie Vody, admiring not only the Russian Federation's rich farmland, but the Pullman's opulence, even down to the ceramic drink coaster manufactured in Coolridge, Tennessee. He tumbled his wine flute, felt the faceted sconces on the long stem, took in the odors of his hard pink lemonade.

Vladimir Plenkanov had grown up under a harsh Russia, where fruit scented or flavoured delectables such as this were uncommon, and not just the genuine citrus juices. Even the mendacious molecules New Jersey alchemists transmute into natural flavours were wont. If the vodka came with flavouring, it was usually that of flamed pine, or some other lumber of the Siberian arbor.

He still returned to his mother drinks on occasion, but still he ordered fruity things like wine coolers when in the company of Westerners, who wouldn't find it queer. Sonja was accustomed to his peculiarities. She'd served as his aid/secretary/bodyguard since leaving the KGB Ceremonial Guards. In her forties, the crow's feet searing around her eyes granted her a severe glare when necessary. She'd known strangeness in her day,

babysitting rock stars during the opening curtain for *Glostnost*. She'd often been left to tend their odd shopping lists. A Mister Bon Jovi had wanted a uniform like hers, a Dave Evans had insisted she find one of the Russian electric guitars with the seventh bass string. Then there were the ones that needed prescriptions filled ...

Far off, some 150 KM south of here, the trappings of civilization are being dismantled with tools ferreted from many points of the Federation. Most are man-portable, some are only moved by vehicle, but all lessen the leverage Putin has on the region of Plenkanov's immediate interest; the Stans, as *Amerikansky* pundits call them.

Plenkanov allowed his mind to walk into the war room while tuning in to Handel's *Water Music* emanating from his iPod ear buds.

Inside his head was Father Matteo Ricci of the Jesuit order. Father Ricci, an ancestor of Thomas Ricci, had introduced the Method of Loci in China in 1853. To Plenkanov, linking the man that introduced China to the art of memory to a top lieutenant of Roger Gordian was all too convenient.

The elder Ricci led him around, bonding his spacial memory to various concepts, until the loci of a battle plan came together. Ricci opened the doors of a cathedral Plenkanov remembered from when he was a kid. Each feature of the worship house linked to reams of facts the Russian had pursued rote memorization of. The physical reality wasn't enough. Ricci keyed open doors beyond the three dimensional physical reality of the cathedral, entering the virtually created wing, greatly expanding the breadth of Vladimir Plenkanov's memory palace.

Inside were strange mosaics. Ricci and Plenkanov identified them as mahjong tiles. Each image triggered memories of different texts.

Vladimir almost thanked the figment monk before leaving Winston Churchill's 'em-

pire of the mind.’

Camp William Eaton

‘They’ve got us surrounded again, the poor bastards.’ -Creighton Abram,
during the battle of Bastogne, 1944.

He didn’t super-elevate the Strela SA-7 missile, not bothering with the IFF button on the left. With one thumb, he reached behind the grip, switching a lever that granted power to the gyro, flushed coolant into the infrared seeker head, and juiced the gas cylinder. He thumbed the shutter open, anticipated a kick from the nitrogen gas. He aimed squarely at the exhaust port nearest Camp William Eaton’s power plant. The plant being a gas-cooled fission reactor of South African design, according to Geiger readouts, was an enticing source of catastrophic fallout. He triggered low. The cool propellant couldn’t keep it aloft, and the missile thudded and skipped atop the sand fifty feet ahead, risking malfunction. But it homed, extending the warhead in the port before detonation, spewing aluminum shards both outward and inward. While the concrete suffered only superficial scars, the aluminum grate and tubing were clear.

Terrance Arthur Peel tapped his runner, the track-suited Nairobi sprinter with the stick grenade for a baton. His pedaling motored on. Behind, a wide row of mortars showered thick plumes of chaff confetti, shrouding the Phalanx gatling cannons, while a wide line of Sagger anti-tank missiles volleyed against them. Some lines snagged in sprinkling debris, some shooters lost sight of their projectiles in the fog of tinsel, crashing them on no target, and some still flew in the path of intercepting cannon fire. But enough expired the turrets. The most lethal guns, the naval cannons capable of 2-miles ranges, deadened conclusively after the second enfilade.

The lone runner, moving in Olympian time, avoided volatile intercept long enough to lurch his grenade down the coolant throat before a base gunner palate burst a crimson trio through his chest. The redundant runner, unheeding, forced his satchel charge in before facing the same fate. The diversion gave one of TAP's 57mm recoilless riflemen enough breathing room to remove the pallet from play.

It was then that Peel was satisfied a general charge could succeed.

Inside

A headache flashed at Roger Gordian's left temple after seeing the deft exploits of the invaders. Field guns softened them up from a humongous standoff range, the enemy's barrage had been precise, they'd sneaked an infantry force through the desert, and they'd cleared all obstacles with the skill of superb sappers and basic artillery shells.

The ex-marine, Paul Evens, somehow noticed the wiry contact fuses before the skilled analysts.

"No one else remember those being used to snag barbed wire in the First World War?" He'd asked, shrugging carelessly when all stared. Evens, who'd been his own boss re-possessing items for creditors, seemed unable to read anyone's facial expression, yet had noticed wires emanating from shells pelting the perimeter. He'd found the base mole by connecting a flash on a monitor with a radio noise. This strange Semper Fi savant had thoughtfully burned a data disk of the software for the Phalanx guns, and asked Gordian for permission to load it into the C-RAM gun they had in storage.

A percussion inside the structure! Duck!

Evens kept the pleading look on his face, not deterred from the subject.

"Yes, yes! Get moving! We're under attack!"

The marine knew his way through chaos. He trained out the klaxon and lights, seeing clarity. The explosion had come from the vent by the reactor, so it didn't concern him. The pallet holding the C-RAM, short for Counter-Rocket-Artillery-Mortar-system, was on a separate path.

Outside

The dogs of Peel's force, an exiled band of Irish Republican Army terrorists, worked under him near the top (so they thought) of the mercenary totem.

Dave Hewson, gunman, an old motorcycle-borne assassin from the days before they'd killed that royal, Mountbatten, when he was a teenager. They'd killed a lot of British soldiers before that, but nobody cared about anyone but the royal, except Peel.

Hewson cradled the symbol of revolutionary movements, the AK-47M, on a leather strap, concealed his medallion under his tan forline.

"Ullmhaigh (ready)!" He yelled, then commenced the count to three. "Aon, d, tr!"⁸

Inside

"We got our first bonzai charge," a tech dryly commented, "I had to key our inner perimeter Claymores on the eastern wall."

Roger strolled over, resting one hand on the tech's chair.

"The proper move. Ignite the fire trench."

Already, he thought, we're down to a canal of burning petroleum between them and our wall being breached. Where is the good news?

The visionary entrepreneur was far removed from his typical quixotic mood when

⁸ 'aon' sounds like 'en' 'd' sounds like 'doe' 'tr' sounds like 'tree'

Ricci and Nimec returned from the sickbay in fresh unbloodied desert tees.

“The tank turrets, they need-” Rog preempted the conclusion.

“I know. The turrets need reinforcing, but the sentry guns are gone, artillery is ceaseless, and we’re being overrun.”

“Boss-”

“I won’t calm down-”

“Where’s Evens!”

Roger’s demeanor softened. Nimec was going to lead a counterattack!

“With the fire trench burning, we can reset the roborifles,” Ricci declared, nodding at Nimec.

“Right. This sudden cession puts them into transition; they’re either storming us or setting a line of contravallation.”

Nimec snap-turned upon hearing Paul’s location, stopped, pulled by Gord’s voice.

“Hold on, how’s, uh, what’s his name?”

“Jamal,” Peter frowned, “he’s going to make it,” sotto voce: “if the rest of us hold on.”

Various Locations, in Chronological Order

Ethernet 0/113 moved i/o daily under the remote command of Vladimir Plenkanov through his manipulations of the binary digit. It truly is amazing what one can do merely by reversing binary values. But what’s more amazing is how much can be missed by an administrator watching the events from a higher language, like C.

Plenkanov’s autonomous program eventually managed to reverse polarity of the Al Mabaheth’s auditing settings, from logging failed attempts, to logging successes. In a

higher language, say C, the change requires one word. Change “Failure” into “Success,” but peering into assembly, you’ll see the change is more elegant. One digit becomes another, and detecting this isn’t easy.

As it happened, no one in Al Mabatheth security forces had their eyes on the Microsoft 2000 event viewer as these changes happened. The changes occurred during morning prayer. Vladimir covered his tracks by shrinking the maximum log size from 512kb to 64, and set old events to be overwritten by new ones.

Routine events he scheduled played out, quickly overwriting what he’d done. To a viewer, it would look like a normal user had been fooling around writing bad poetry.

What an observer wouldn’t see would be motion detections from customs sensors overlooking Al Rub al Khali.

Southern Iraq, Several Miles West of Highway 7

Vladimir’s left hook. None of the vehicles in his convoy were detected, not the Fahd 240 APCs, not the Fahd 30s, not the Jeeps, and not the hired army driving them. His old scheme of covertly funding development in the all but dead Arab Organization for Industrialization should at last return dividends.

The Fahd vehicle was one of the latest, but possibly not the last, German-Egyptian collaboration on a weapon meant for destroying the state to the east, Peter Strelock guessed. He scoped the boxy shape through a thick sandy wake, imagined the Mercedes Benz flaunt with a Teutonic roar.

The vehicle had the heart of a Panzer, a Germanic heart crafted to slaughter the Jewish homeland. But that wasn’t to be. The Egyptians sued for peace, nearly dissolving the Arab organization, the ARI. If not for funds meant to pay this very operation, the

manufacturing project may have stagnated with the peace accords and the end of the Cold War.

“Those are our rides,” he announced to the group, “take good care of those vehicles. The cheaper model costs around fifty K US each, with the turreted ones costing some ten times more.”

Compared to a Bradley or Stryker, a bargain, really, but Plenkanov was but an arms dealer, though a highly successful Russian oligarch.

The Elbrus Mountain Area

“A man melts the sand so he can see the world outside...” Vladimir Plenkanov idly sang along with his iPod as he checked RSS news feeds from around the world. The LA Times was still singing the script he fed them about that Paul Evens, and the Washington Post had a blurb about the helicopter sent to retrieve him... a few minutes before it took off. Good. When my guys shoot it down, the Pentagon will blame the press. Resulting in counterclaims the US government is trying to muffle free speech, and so on, until everyone’s so busy looking for dirt on the domestic opposition, the actual foreign leak slips away. BCC files a report that the British are under heavy attack. No word yet on casualties. An Italian paper, Il Mundo or something, filed a bizarre opinion column about the Camp Bucca battle. Through convoluted junk science, they pin the blame behind the parking lot explosions on light reflected from the spa. And swamp gas caused the Chernobyl meltdown. Right. “The capitalist decadence of the Camp Bucca spa... blah blah blah...” He promptly removed that oddball journal from his news aggregation list, and immersed his mind on heavier things.

San Jose, California

“Wave function collapsed,” muttered the network security administrator, “someone’s coming through.” It had been a rough couple of days for the computer geeks, more than 48 deprived of the latest Dragon Ball Z episodes. Majin Buu’s dog had been shot by some thugs, and the guys had been anxious to see the conclusion when Miss Breen put them all to work around the clock.

“Crud, I’m locked out.” He could reach the administration panel.

“What major fragger did that?” The phone should work, surely.

“Tom, what mamma jamma locked me out of the admin root?”

Cheetos (puff), crackled on the line.

“Loser says what.”

“What?”

“Gotcha!”

“Hey!” The Cheeto-stained teeth cackled.

“I can’t find any administrative functions locking you out, Boss. Are you on the right page?”

“Monster finger! You know I’m on the right page! It’s the home on my browser! Uh, Tom, what have you been eating under there?”

“Under where?”

“You’ve been eating underwear, that’s gross, Tom.”

“(Sigh) You got me. I found the problem in the page source. A little JAVA script on the top. Are you receiving my PM (private message)?”

The administer read the text body:

Limit GET HEAD POST

```
order allow,deny
deny from 55.555.55.666
allow from all
/LIMIT
```

“Can you erase it, Tom?” A snack food bag rattled.

“I don’t have the admin password.” Silence

“I’m walking over, Tom.”

tracert IP address-d

“What just happened?”

Crunch, crunch, snap.

“Uh, he found me.”

Limit GET HEAD POST

```
order allow,deny
deny from 55.555.55.661
allow from all
/LIMIT
```

The Administrator slapped Tom’s keyboard.

“I’m locked out here, too! What’s going on?”

“He got us. He’s doing a port scan!”

The big red phone rang.

“Breen, how do we explain this?”

Wearily, he picked up.

Tom imagined a grownup's voice from the Peanuts cartoon on the other end.

"I figured you'd lost access. No, it isn't Bill Gates' fault, Linus' kernel would face the same bug. The computers are OK, we... uh, funny story, he locked us out of the router."

Tom saw the sagging grimace of his boss's countenance.

"He typed some Java script in. We can clear it-" His palm wrapped over the mouth piece.

"Tom! Unplug the router!"

The Elbrus Mountain Area

The routers are mapped, the OS detected, and the firewall is scanned. Now I'll do them a favor, thought the wily Russian, I'll secure their data for them.

San Jose

"Tom, I'm locked out."

"Dude, we aren't even physically on the network anymore. Of course you are."

"No, I'm, my hard disk is locked."

"What do you mean?"

"It's asking for a password."

"Dude, don't you know the way around? Try a boot disk."

"It isn't the OS password, it's the hard disk."

"Huh. I had my mouth full. Now I see your problem. I'm also locked out. None of my admission passwords work. It looks to be 32 bits long..."

"What's wrong!"

“These hard disk passwords are of the ATA Security Feature Set! They were made for notebook PCs back when we were still on Win 3.1. They were meant to secure data if you lost your laptop at the airport. A hacker could take them home and never crack...

”Oh God, there isn’t a countermeasure ever conceived for this! We never thought of it! It just sounded like a swell idea for the paranoid, so before we knew it, the industry moved beyond adding them to portable PCs, and added them to practically every desktop hard disk. The Xbox has the feature! We’re screwed!”

Southern Iraq

Gigantic truck tires made up the fence of the Umm Qasr British redoubt that Mikhail the Rifle drove his ambulance into. The tires made perfect containers for one of the natural resources of Iraq; sand. Stacked one upon another, with a packaging tarp binding them together, such a wall could possibly withstand bombardment from the RGP models walking to and fro in the low tech war on terror.

Two Royal Marines, embassy types, hmm, stood on guard with the normal SA-80s, and an L-21 amid sandbags. One stayed stationed at the gun, the other signaled the Land Rover with four fingers.

Ruzhyo displayed the answering six digits. Today’s answer: ten. Ruzhyo successfully solved the equation. Thank you, Vladimir, for providing the cheat sheet.

The barrier came up, and the marine waved in the Spetznez. The driveway was a cobbled circle circuit. British paras stood ramrod erect on the ambulance entry. No car bomb barricade impeded his progress. On the curb he stopped, felt the gun. He had their attention.

“Tallyho, mates, I have me a litter in the boot of my lorry!” A Spetz assassin knew

how to draw 'em in.

“Me mates have had it. Now are you goin’ t’ help me win Mister Blair’s war or aren’t ya?”

As Mikhail hopped out, they shouldered their firearms, granted the Chechen two solid second advantage.

He’d driven with the Strayer Voigt Infinity in condition one on the drive. Outside, with a round chambered, the pistol was cocked and not safetied. In fact, the trigger guard was gone. He’d never polished a feed ramp more than this one. Surely .25s wouldn’t jam with so much wiggle room.

Deuce to the thorax, solo to head, one brute dead. After the head, deuce some more lead, correct, pierce the head. That’s another kill, following the Mozambique Drill.

The song verse loosened him, allowed the smooth motions to follow through. He fingered six subsonic .25 rounds in under two seconds, all internally silenced by pistons built inside. Spaced embedded tacks steadied the frame, the OKO red dot guided his eyes, and the shoulder-strapped rifles slowed the Brits.

‘Mozambique the bloody creep!
For he’s been breathing far too long
and you must shut him down.
There’s only one way to construe
the way he points that gun at you.
The time to act is now.’

Six transuranic bullets impacted the thoracic cavities and cranio ocular cavity of their heads, transferring the most hammering force possible from subsonic rounds.

Tac load, panoramic scan, and he hauled the ambulance defibrillator to the door. A water hose lay outside. He turned the knob, spraying water. It slicked the concrete. He knew it conducted electricity, so he worked it beside the door. It seeped in. Against the wall, he scanned 180 degrees. Clear. He studied his beating heart, calmed it. Knees bent, he took calming breaths. Endorphins and chill sweat seeped in, almost like super tai chi. He felt circulating blood calm from redoubling, heat prickling around sub-dermal fat, poking at one knee.

The hair on his fingers felt almost ticklish with the paddles throbbing at 400 joules. His ears focused. He'd removed the silicon ear pieces after firing. Thump. He felt the infrasonic footballs of a booted patrol. A wet thump. The paddles chortled and clacked. They hummed and sizzled while shorting.

Inside, a dozen Anglo hearts ejected. They all splashed and thrashed. He smelled roasted meat, listened to shrieks. He dropped the ambulance's jumped cables, and sat through the deathly arias.

Although he listened, he settled into his next move, used the two UK rifles. He examined both chambers, witnessed the rounds. Satisfied, he took aim. The cross hairs met at the cranium of the L-21 gunner. Ruzhyo crab-walked parallel until both were in view, CRACK! Gluck gluck! Back of the shoulder, back of the ribs, through the neck. The other fell like a colander posing as a can of red paint.

Skip the tactical reload, pan for threats, and evac with the Land Rover. But first, he unstrapped the Sterling submachine gun from behind his back, and kicked open the emergency door, and swept the floor.

Author's Notes:

- I didn't make up any of the electronic security vulnerabilities. They're all real, and they haven't

been rectified by those that supposedly exist to provide for our safety. The cyber attacks detailed in this chapter are extremely conservative. I placed grave limits on Vladimir, in fact. All of his attacks were only allowed a few minutes of preparation time.

- The Irish words are real, and the Mozambique Drill song lyrics put to verse were written by Jim Sorrentino, presumably. All the computer code in the story is real and belongs in the public domain. The Xbox really has the storage device I described.
- The British tire fort is fiction.
- The Strayer Voigt Infinity exists in theory; they do come in many customizable configurations, but aren't yet publicly offered in .25 caliber. Thank you, Cheah, for some contributing research on this.
- If you are curious about news aggregators, I built one on my website. Instructions exist on my Livejournal. The entry is on May 12th, 2005.

Chapter 21

Casa

This chapter is dedicated to Steve Vincent

‘Man fears the darkness, and so he scrapes away at the edges of it with fire.’ –Rei Ayanami,
in *Neon Genesis Evangelion*

‘It’s a simple formula. The greater the tragedy, the greater the emotional effect.’ –Legato
Bluesummers, in *Trigun*

‘Just as in physics the center of gravity is always found where the mass is most concentrated, and just as every blow directed against the body’s center of gravity yields the greatest effect, and—moreover—the strongest blow is the one achieved by the center of gravity, the same is true in war. The armed forces of every combatant, whether an individual state or an alliance of states, have a certain unity and thus a certain interdependence or connectivity (*Zusammenhang*); and just where such interdependence exists, one can apply the center of gravity concept. Accordingly, there exist within

these armed forces certain centers of gravity that, by their movement and direction, exert a decisive influence over all other points; and these centers of gravity exist where the forces are most concentrated. However, just as in the world of inanimate bodies where the effect on a center of gravity has its proportions and limits determined by the interdependence of the parts, the same is true in war.’ –Carl Von Clausewitz, describing a center of gravity, as translated from German by Antulio J. Echevarria II

Gordian’s office, Camp William Eaton

“**W**HEN you look at the globe where we live from space, you’ll see a thousand points of light. These lights shine with all the bustling energy of the heavens. These lights are the most accurate boundaries of our civilization. Classically, these lights have been equated with safety, even if no obvious forms of security complement the lighting. I’m in the business of expanding that light, removing the darkness from a region that’s been dim for far too long.”

Roger Gordian rested his arms on his massive oak executive table, capturing the lone news camera in his eye.

“The hub from which I’ve expanded this light is here, at Camp William Eaton. The theories of Max Plank, the Theory of Quantum Physics, tells us that light isn’t a ray, but chunks of energy. Indeed, we move chunks of energy, all the vitality of modern life, from this hub right here. This endeavor to connect the Iraqis to the vitality of our wondrous civilization has bulged this facility into the center of gravity of the entire nation. The community that exists here is the harmonious force that binds these people together, and as such, it unifies the light.”

Roger nodded toward his strategist and speech-writer, Vince Scull. Both men studiously studied the motions of the wacky ROMP, the Randomly Oscillating Magnetic Pendulum, swing on one side of the desk.

“Warfare is an open-ended system slaved to the vagaries of the butterfly effect. Daily we see minor perturbations fluidly motioning us into a completely different war. This evolving system has kept the Pentagon from coming to terms with what we’re facing here, but by carefully designing the functions of this hub for fortifications, communications, and logistics, we’ve drawn together a gravitational node for this country’s vigor to join together. What this facility is to Southern Iraq is simultaneously what the Alexandria Library was to classical knowledge, what Memphis is to Federal Express, and what Khe Sahn was to the Northern border of South Vietnam.

This is the middle of the table, and if they break it, the legs are immaterial.”

A deep bass flutter shook some lime dust from the ceiling, powdering Roger’s nearly alabaster coif. Scully’s basset hound-like bloodshot eyes faintly shifted. His meaty right hand signaled “OK.” A rotary ululate report from what could only be a Vulcan cannon emphasized the immediacy of Gordian’s quixotic address.

“You can hear that our counterattack has begun. There has been a truthful maxim put forth in warfare that puts a premium on taking the initiative. The words come from Clausewitz, but I’ve heard it expressed commonly. From one of the superior cartoons I’ve watched with my grandkids,¹ and even from the current President of the United States, the near universal belief that the best defense is a good offense. While the President has made the phrase his near trademark since endeavoring on this ambitious campaign, it is free for all who put a premium on protecting our culture to cherish and practice.

¹ The cartoon Roger Gordian watched with his grandkids was *Mobile Suit Gundam Wing*

I came here with my eyes on connecting a more broad and perfect center of gravity, a free and vital Iraq. One that can speak for itself, protect itself, and instill the values of a liberated society.

Remember the flickering hopes seen from above. They seem to sparkle on a vast sea of darkness. The enemy may at times seem large enough to stand over the points of light and smother them in a valley of shadow. I assure you the fields of light are aligning together, conquering the night. Sunrise is long overdue in this region, but the soldiers of light are marching the illuminating power of undiluted freedom even on the enemy's core, where shrouds are instituted to obscure our torch, and the unreasonable fear of apostasy muffles our cries for understanding. I came here with my eyes on a high sunny plane where we could all enhance our common values and collaborate on nursing the newborns toward furthering our initial steps.

Seeing all the progress around me, I know I came to Iraq with my eyes fully open."

Outside

It looked every part the doomsday tank of art show horror, the invincible Israeli armored D9 Caterpillar bulldozer, spewing rotary fire from the massive front plow blade, where the marine had managed to chain the remaining Phalanx cannon. It sputtered lead and flame. The gearbox whirled, teeth grinding down on grit, willing the drive train, heaving forward the treads. Scarved heads planted themselves under shallow trenches, sometimes not deep enough.

The bull dozer blitzed. Ricci, the ex-SEAL, fought against the sand grains given flight by a nascent gust, and chased the beast's wake storm. His waist turned to inspect his troops. Yes, hunched silhouettes were rolling out carts of cleaned sentry guns! Others

hauled smaller ROBORifles over one shoulder, and unburdened light SWORD infantry filed behind Ricci. Most ran with ‘variable velocity’ versions of the M16A2.

Something swooped from above.

“Where’d they come from?”

His elevated eyes missed that crater.

“Sumtafitch!” mechanical and thermal energy burned his hands and knees, his chest pressed against the ground with a breath. A steel splinter pricked his wrist, and two slowing hands pressed on his back.

“Geese season’s over, Reach.” The left arm of Pete Nimec, the ex-Ranger, hooked under Ricci’s- ‘Reach’s’ armpit, lifting him to both feet.

“That UCAV must be from Noriko’s bunch out at Camp... duh, Chennault? Yeah, Claire Chennault. I-” A tank turret barked, scattered sub munitions at entrenched enemy.

“What?”

“I said another must’ve picked off the enemy!”

“Yeah, I seem to notice!”

In the dozer

He loathed the setup, stringing wires in and out of the cabin, chaining the Phalanx to the Earth-moving blade, and driving toward a massed line of determined infantry, but brother, he’d read of the Battle for Jenin 2002, had managed contact with several IDF members.

They never lost a man in an armored bulldozer.

He opened the throttle and steered toward the nearest turret. It barely looked like a gray circle under his headlights, but it wasn't demolished. Someone's alive. Someone needs a marine real bad.

Behind the dozer

The left arm of the ex-ranger dragged the ex-SEAL from his scraped knees, urged him ahead.

"C'mon, Evens needs protection!" Nimec watched a troop of red tracers swarm the dozer canopy on both flanks, originating from positions wide of the gat's sweeping arc. The marine attempted pivoting the tracks, in order to brush them away. In dark silhouette, both men saw the highly Freudian shape of long shafts with bulbous heads shouldered by the desert-uniformed insurgents. RPG-7s.

They bucked off their shoulders the explosive projectiles copied from the German Panzerfaust design, a design shape feared by Great Patriotic War tanker veterans after the nightmare of the Berlin siege. The design infamous for its deadly use in the Mogadishu ghettos, and for its employment around Gaza and the Sunni-populated region around Baghdad.

The design exploded prematurely on the shielding grill extending inches outside of the plated armor. Successive hits seemed Xeroxed matches of the first one, except the pivoting progressed. Green tracers emanated from the plow, ephemerally illuminating the sky adjacent to the falling bodies.

Nimec stood tranquil, rapt by the iridescent jade.

"One in ten, son of a gun."

"What, Pete?"

“The tracers, one in ten. This is our game.” Unthinking, Nimec’s hand raced up his neck, and clutched his dog tags.

Gordian’s office, Camp William Eaton

“The enemy at the gates know what we’re about. One of my associates in this endeavor, a Mister Singe, aptly described them as skinheads. Think about what that label means, think about what the common definition of a skinhead is, and determine they truly are skinheads, a category of thugs our society condemns above all else.

“They attack integration; marital, social, commercial. British and American citizens have encountered the movement, and largely condemned it. The same movement took root in Russia, where the disdainful movement clashes with Turks, Tartars, Chechens, and others for little reason other than that they originate from somewhere other than Russia.

“The current movement we are fighting is ideologically identical. Granted, it is perceived to focus less on racial characteristics, but it still discriminates against those of a differing national origin.

“Let me tell you about the reality of their movement. The reality is that this movement will manhandle a man from his car, jab a gun at the back of his neck, and pull the trigger. This man never harmed anyone in his life, he was just born somewhere different. Maybe he was born in Groton, Connecticut, maybe his crime was reporting about Pakistani business, or maybe his crime was touring the Mediterranean with his wife, or maybe that he was born American, or Jewish. It doesn’t matter! They never victimized anyone, they just came here to do ordinary honest work, or to vacation here, or to retire.

“This is the glory of the jihad, the glory of bombing houses of worship, because they kneel on Saturday instead of Friday, the glory of hacking a scimitar on someone’s neck, because his alms to the poor were Christian, rather than Moslem. This is the same glory as that OFA group shoving a teenage boy through a tractor combine, so his body would be mangled to death; all because he whistled at a girl of a different color! You know that incident, you raged against it, now why should your response be more tepid when a whole crowd faces an execution by scorching explosion for providing food for somebody different?”

Vince Scull signaled for a deep breath, for a transition to a more calm, collected, demeanor. The passionate red drained from Roger, replaced by a more placid pallor.

“Our organization’s infrastructure in this region works to lubricate connectivity for both domestic and foreign enterprise. Because we’re building to share with other interests, we’ll drive costs for everything downward, and because everyone in Iraq will be a consumer, we’ll increase everyone’s standard of living. It will be the same as giving everyone a raise.”

A mortar shell shook a breath of dust from the ceiling.

“They aren’t interested in giving anyone a raise, their interests are in creating discontent, so they can slave the hopeless to the gun. Helpless people without outlets for independence are the future slave-warriors of their glorious revolution. Ha! They want a new crop of miserable people in legion to beget another legion of miserable people until they have a miserable army in mass to export misery into lands that don’t appreciate this glory! Well, we surprised the terror-mongers, we’re knocking on their doors, and we’re planning on planting the best we have on their ground. This is their center, and it’s blooming in our favor. The cancer of their misery-exporting business is in remission,

and vitality is pouring back in.

I thank you the viewers for sparing your time to listen in. Stay safe.”

As the set director closed shooting, Roger accepted a warm coffee cup with the UpLink logo emblazed on the side facing the camera. Scull schlepped over with a large mug housed in both his meaty hands.

“Thank you,” said Gordian graciously, “ I tried.”

Nod.

“You gave them the message, about the best we can do,” Vince said, turning for his own coffee, “it made a difference.”

“I suppose,” Gordian replied wistfully, idly dipping a croissant over the brim, “I’ve brought a lot of people here in my folly, if it’s folly.”

“Right, if it’s folly. It isn’t, and it isn’t yours, we’ve all taken ownership of a future worth creating.”

The Village Guesthouse, south of William Eaton

One crusty old Arab sheik lounged smoking at the dinner table in a darkness illuminated by the arcing flares of a surrounding enemy. They might get him this time, *insh Allah*, but they haven’t gotten him in the past seventy years of his life, so he felt content. If they got him now, it still meant he’d outlived many past devils. Seventy years is a full life for a Marsh Arab. Considering his tobacco habit, seventy wouldn’t be bad for him had he lived with these gentlemen.

The one with the peg leg, he paced around a lot, supervising the defense, while the mountain man, Singe, politely corrected Marsh Arab mismanagement of the mortar on their converted tank. The chopper guys, they didn’t seem combat types. Molina set

things right.

For the moment, he'd retreated back in for more chatter with the outside. Though in charge, the radioman he still was. He spoke in English, but in radio English. The sheik could follow that.

Private First Class Manning, the gunner from Madison, Wisconsin, had the FN M240D unbolted from the chopper, firing prone from the roof. The roof trembled when Manning burst, but not much. Blockhouses don't shake much, and fortunately, can safely absorb a Draganov round.

What didn't shake was Molina. Positive feedback came in from the base. Evens had shouldered a counter-offensive, and had disposed of a mole. Oh. Grimly, the sheik nodded. He'd known, but had never confronted it. *Forgiveness awaits him, insh Allah. Hopefully, it awaits us all.* Molina chattered on the wireless. Drones from Chennault pounded the assault, and a gunship from Cairo circled overhead. Though vulnerable, the DC-6 made an excellent gunning platform.

"Say again, Eaton?" Molina's demeanor shifted.

Camp William Eaton

"I said be advised, a platoon or larger sized force of hostile technical are bearing on you from the Southwest. Cat's Eye is reporting an indeterminate amount of Fahd 300-er, Egyptian APCs, armored jeeps, and Somali-style technicals. That means big guns—"

"What the heck type of radio discipline is this?" Molina demanded. "To whom am I speaking?"

The Louisiana man shifted in his seat.

“Its Rollie. Look, you have beaucoup armor humping the desert your way. The JSTARS orbiting doesn’t know how the Saudis let such a large armored force skirt by, but Cat’s Eye don’t got hope of anything slowing them more than their estimated quarter hour ETA. All the high tech needs go-go juice after lighting the fires after chasing some fast-movers from Mullah Land. They’re reporting a FUBARed Green Zone from the mess, so the brass is off the loop. We’re managing what we can.”

Molina mulled over a reply.

“I hear you, Will Eaton, good luck on your counter-offensive. We can hold out in house-to-house fighting a few hours. Thanks for the heads-up.”

Rollie shifted uncomfortably.

“Acknowledged. We’re still facing a hostile logistics train dropping jeep-loads of infantry against us, but I’ll reserve some arty time for you. Just feed me the coordinates .”

Rollie attempted to imagine watching for muzzle flashes from a window, glancing down at a GPS, aiming a laser range-finder, and estimating a location. In a minute, he had fed directions to the Cajun.

“I want anti-personnel rounds proximity-fused and coordinated for TOT, then fired for effect-”

“Most people wait for the results first.”

“Not me. I want your boys to creep it in, and keep loading until their barrels turn white. I want general purpose rounds to fall danger close immediately following.”

Rollie fed it to his Blackberry PDA, repeated the highly-complex order, and heard it confirmed by Molina. He then switched channels to the artillery battery, and relayed the instructions in chunks he believed they could process.

“Anti-personnel rounds timed for TOT, yes sir. Battery loaded, elevated. . . fire!”

The guns, buried in a steel destroyer turret, survived the shellacking dealt out by the enemy, to retaliate in anger. They did. The ex-navy personnel in the turret easily adapted to the corporate culture of UpLink’s Sword service, despite Peter Nimec’s instilling the team with a more Army Ranger culture. Sometimes they still slipped into calling the choppers “helos,” the walls “bulkheads,” the toilet a “head,” and said “aye” to the annoyance of the team leader, but they ran a ship-shape gunning platform, earning their pay grade while conducting the chores ordered by Robin Molina. Rollie need not have worried about them misinterpreting orders. They followed spot on.

They ejected the spent casing from the breech, loaded again, shut the breech, pulled the lanyard, boom. Decrease the angle, eject the casing, load the shell, shut the breech, lanyard pull, fire, repeat for effect.

They walked it further, then switched ammunition types. The general purpose ammo storage door momentarily protested from opening, but a good WHACK! From the palm of Rusty Singleton, a South Dakota native and retired Master Chief from an Arleigh Burke-class destroyer, eased out the obstruction.

The drill finished in three minutes. A battery of four guns averaged roughly nine shells a minute for those solid three, circumscribing the northern border of their friendly town with 114 rounds, almost certainly breaking the lightly dug-in insurgent infantry.

“Cat’s Eye, the JSTARS thingy in the sky, is trying to give us a bomb damage assessment,” radioed Rollie Thibodeau, “mon Deu, They use radar, you know, and could be more, uh, definitive, with a thermal scan, but they don’t see an image of a human body outside the parameter. Great work.”

Outside the Compound

Iranian/Russian high-tech evidently never thwarted American high-tech, making Commander Farouz extremely nervous. His T-55 probably never broke 55 kilometers an hour in this desert sand, and those unmanned Yankee birds probably carried ten death-arrows apiece, meaning those two circling had twenty opportunities to kill his armor.

He'd thought those Gophers, the SA-13s their mysterious benefactor had bestowed upon them, would provide enough umbrella to spare him from onslaught, but the American Sheik's high-tech came in a larger quantity than they'd thought, and the spare Gophers could only escort them so far before risking the fire of NAVAL artillery !

Worse, the radio told him the sappers and shock troops had failed to remove some of the T-72 tank turrets arming the base perimeter. The news that the G-5 guns had failed to even dislodge the beached naval guns left him dumbstruck completely. What exactly did they shoot? For once breaking with his tradition of being the good soldier, Farouz, a proud veteran of the Revolutionary Guard, asked for an explanation.

The reply had been more than curt.

"The dipsticks in intelligence and the artilleryists underestimated the enemy's Short-stop trance on our proximity fuses. They had to saturate soft targets so long, they didn't get to the hard ones."

He'd been thankful for the candor, it had bolstered his faith in the leadership, but he felt apprehensive about his chances of surviving the mission. He'd fought the Iran-Iraq war, respected his counterparts in the Republican Guard, and had seen them decimated in two wars and countless air strike operations in between. After visiting Kosovo and Yugoslavia in 1999, he'd personally seen what this high tech stuff could do. Without

the support with armor on the ground, the Americans and NATO scared the Shiite out of the conflict region. The big stealth bomber had shown up for that war, as did some larger numbered GBUs.

The JDAM and JSOW weapons made him tremble, because weather couldn't disrupt them. American and British armor scared him more. How to hide from it? Melt into the city?

Western news agencies and clerics in their towers will say what they want, but Farouz saw little hope of living past this mission.

He swiveled his co-axle chain-gun toward a flash in the sky. He caught a glance of illuminated smoke corkscrewing, saw the flame jet out, and saw the dive-bombing outline of the man-less destroyer.

Dung it! The bucking of the recoil pulled his crosshairs off the shape! Breath, it is climbing slowly, heading away, banking sharply. The nose suddenly tilted directly at him. Farouz triggered a long stream, but theUCAV's maneuver had been a feint. The tanker didn't know aeronautics, but whatever he saw seemed impossible. Big mistake; it flew parallel to him, showing a fat, juicy profile. The dot in the middle of his crosshairs eclipsed the bird, he fired. Not good! The tracers trailed behind it!

I get it, I have to aim ahead. He did aim at the future location of the aircraft, but initially overestimated its airspeed. He then overcorrected. He mentally triangulated with his imagination. Kabam!

Flight, weightlessness, his heart and stomach leapt into his throat, then rushed back to normal, as flight turned ballistic. Farouz felt gravel merge with his cheek. It pained, it burned, it embedded in his face. The effects of a skeletal concussion bled in, and he understood. The high-tech had punched a hole into his universe. He dared not get up.

He dared not glimpse at his tank, at the remains of the three youngsters under his care. He dared only focus on the salt and acid spicing the granules in his mouth, and only on that until the darkness seeped into his world.

Peel's observation post Terrance Arthur Peel's binocular-enhanced vision gave instant feedback to the reality of the situation. Some yahoo cowboy had led an armored column out by example, using his unhealthy machismo to spit on Peel's attack plan. The rogue had a bulldozer, one of those D9s those Jewish chaps used, running to and fro with a gatling chained to the blade, running over fields of men like a big mechanical reaper. He'd brought friends.

A small armored Bobcat backhoe chased behind it. A man in a cowboy hat piloted it. He looked familiar. Yes, he was a South African TAP new from the 90s. He looked thrilled, taking on the old-time airs of a cavalry officer. A cavalier, that's what he was! Well, he'd messed up everything. Following him were the big APCs.

Peel's aide had to rouse the 106mm recoilless riflemen and Sagger missile men from their cowering. The light brown heel of his combat boots had to contact some rumps harshly, and still some wouldn't rise.

"We'll have to fire and maneuver," shouted the British leader, grabbing his aide's bicep, "I want these guys firing, while I lead some guys down this trench," said he, pointing toward one that led to the base's edge and to the flank of the armored column. A smoking wreck of an armored tiller, dismantled by a stationary T-72 turret, concluded the trench's progression.

"This has been some bloody Hell and a fist of aspirin."

The bulldozer

The marine surveyed the biological litter his actions had created, looking around the prone six-patterned desert fatigues for stragglers or infiltrating sappers. He stretched his senses, feeling out for shapes and movements that didn't belong. He'd lost a headlight in his rampage, but otherwise had a fully functional tracked mount. The immediate presence of the enemy faded, but rocket mortars arced overhead.

Evens bent forward, where he kept the computer controlling the gatling. He punched open the CD tray, fed in the original anti-mortar program, and watched the old operation gush to life, aided in the inundation by a reservoir built into the temporary space of the RAM and virtual RAM.

Steel beamed skyward, igniting rocket fuel. Many splashes of fuel came ablaze, brightening the night. Paul exploited the illumination, craning his neck so his eyes could find mischief.

They did. Stooped figures darted down a trench. Bundles of RPG-7 rounds burdened their backs. Evens had a gun port ready. He grabbed the M24 jutting from it, and let a rocket grenade bundle have it.

In the trench

A trillion nerves overloaded with heat and shock, screaming the announcement that the organism faced mortal end. The sensation drowned out all other news until Peel tasted the rouge gushing from the divide in his lower lip. Peel, numb, reluctantly, flopped from his stomach to his back, and visually established a record of what happened. They'd been hoisted on their own petard, and now Tap felt thoroughly moist. He knew just how much water sprouted from the de-compiled human at ground zero, some ninety percent

of his makeup was water. Water, tinged garnet, matted the trench. Water and bone shivers.

The other bodies looked solid. Peel refrained from checking for pulses, opting instead to get that Yank.

The dirt he clawed. He clawed to a sitting position. He rested the bipod of his weapon, watched the bulldozer tracks turn, and squeezed the trigger. He inhaled smoke, foul acerbic smoke, before collapsing in his refuge.

In the bulldozer

He felt it. While the gatling's software reverted back into operations against the infantry, Paul Evens felt the thud, and couldn't see the damage.

"Nigel, care to take a peek under my skirt?"

The Afrikaner growled seductively.

"I've never turned down the offer before, cept from one odd Scotsman," he laughed. Evens stopped, waited for the backhoe to overtake him. Finally, he idled to the bulldozer's port.

"Hmm, he nipped you a little bit. I believe he merely snipped apart your wire cage, chap."

Good news pursued good news. The gatling once again trawled over the battlespace, rendering a clean surface free of hostiles. The marine quickly keyed in the mortar-intercept mode, and advised Pete Nimec that the guys in the APCs should dismount to clean the trenches.

Chapter 22

Helicopter Extraction

“My lord, I think... I think your book is right. ‘The desert is an ocean in which no oar is dipped’ and on this ocean the Bedu go where they please and strike where they please. This is the way the Bedu have always fought. You’re famed throughout the world for fighting in this way and this is the way you should fight now!” –T.E. Lawrence, in *Lawrence of Arabia*

‘ All right, but apart from the sanitation, the medicine, education, wine, public order, irrigation, roads, a fresh water system, and public health, what have the Romans ever done for us?’ –John Cleese, in *The Life of Brian*

A burgundy orb of hydrogen gas burned furiously in just about the Eastern horizon. Seeing the explosions in the distance became progressively more difficult. Mikhail

the Rifle sucked one last gulp of lime fruit punch from his camelback canteen before dismounting his truck. He waved at a passing Fahd-30 AIFV and scrambled toward the town corner he planned to cover.

He rotated his arms from the shoulders, and did deep knee bends, checking for signs of fatigue. No, he could go on, even in the heavy boron carbide (B5C) plated armor he'd donned from the truck. Once again, he had an AN-94 in his hands. Strelock had made sure Mikhail had these items and a fresh Under Armour t-shirt. He'd asked the driver for his Lexan tactical goggles. Good Kevlar KM2 material made up his helmet.

Radio chatter spoke of sun dogs in the distant east; it would seem airpower was breaking the main attack. Mikhail Ruzhyo couldn't help if Vlad's strategic vision collapsed, he had a more narrow set of goals, namely killing anyone with a gun in the nearby village.

He'd broken the British Army with his small fire team, and now needed to roll up this hamlet. Their informants reported a private military company's fire team supporting a handful of Marsh Arab militia fighters inside. They had one armored vehicle comparable to the Achzarit infantry armoured vehicle.

There were Sword operatives in that town, and they needed taken out.

"The operatives inside may have killed Kuhl," he said to himself, giving a fleeting thought about the one contract soldier he'd deemed on his level. Mikhail had respected Kuhl, a former German Spetznez member, and by extension, he respected his killers. They'd tracked Kuhl around the world, found him, and didn't take him back alive.

Ruzhyo had vowed not to be pursued so easily. But since Anna's passing, such matters are reduced to the same urgency as commanding a chess board.

Peter Strelock ran in the same direction as Ruzhyo, no doubt for a similar reason. Despite the Shooter's head start, the Rifle immersed his feet in the shallow briny fenland first. He kept pedaling. It smelt dead, and of salt. The malleable black bottom sucked him in, clutching violently to his protesting kicks. He crouched, willingly enmeshing in the muck.

He psychically rebounded from the deathly stench, fighting his way down. *To be concealed is to be alive. To be exposed is to die. The swamp is the only camouflage in this whole bald nation, save the steeps of the Kurdish region. Rule one of understanding Iraq is that God hates the country. Rule two is that if God hates a country, the Americans will show up eventually. Bad things seek out bad places, and bad places are magnets for Americans. Rule three is to extend American traits to the British. Rule four is to recognize that all rules concerning Iraq are applicable to Murphy's Law, and if there are any more such laws, Mikhail Ruzhyo will find them before his life expires.*

Americans will doubtlessly make a bellicose entrance in Chechnya one day; misery exists there, too. Besides, Vladimir lives there.

Meanwhile

The lead Al Fahd armored personnel carrier, sporting a venerable BMP-2 turret up top, accelerates with the throttle constricting no fuel from the animated pistons as it jars an obstruction of donkey carts and oil drums. The foil, a passive sentinel of formidable weight, obstructed. The terrible collision shakes lucidity from the driver's mind, but liberates sandbags from the interiors of the carts and drums, where they fall underfoot, granting traction for a climb.

The thick treads of the lead wheels grip tightly, the clinging leads to climbing, then a forward lurch. Lead wheels crest the top, still turning, capitalizing on the high center of gravity of the carts, which are now beginning to tumble. The barrier shakes, as if being pulled down.

Behind a cinder block structure, the Gurkha, Fraser Singe, watches on, radio detonator trembling in one hand, waiting for the pounce. Singe tries training his eyes on the undercarriage of the formidable vehicle, imagining a target. It lines up. He depresses the button. He hears a charge crack, then a secondary steel-on-steel puncture sound, and an opening rip.

The blast sparked no fire, a scant light display, and as much noise as a 120mm cannon, but the Fahd APC was dead on impact. Molina had molded some C4 bricks into a nest for a steel plate to form a deadly platter charge. Robin said the plate would impact the APC's bottom at 6000 feet per second, puncturing the hull before spiraling through the interior compartments.

Singe is convinced that's what occurred, for life is no longer evident in that vehicle. The turret lacked life, and weight released from the accelerator, for the wheels desisted that one monotonous activity of turning. Tracers cut the air above the agora to Singe's flank. A fusillade of 30mm and 12.7mm shells walking into the T-72 chassis the Nepalese soldier considers home. The splattering is rattling, and infuriating, but the quad-fifties return bursts, almost casually. Inside were Marsh Arabs, young men that didn't grow up with Gameboys or pocket calculators, operating electronics built by Israelis, of all people, more advanced than those found in American vehicles.

It dawns on Fraser how unreal this is. An intense gunfight such as this must seem antiseptic in that tank hull, where a kid under twenty years of age operated a control

yoke to gun down men and vehicles on an LCD screen. It must seem like playing a PS 2 without even knowing what an Atari 2600 is like. *The farm boys have become Jedi.*

The rumbling from the quad guns sounds more persistent and less staccato than the automatic weapons of custom. They are as water cannons, cleaning mud from where they caked on a Cadillac your older cousins took into the mountain roads after a rainy day.

Those vehicles Fraser can't see, but he imagines they can't be much tougher than the aircraft the M3P guns can destroy in an instant. *Possibly, they're stinky Swiss now, holed but perhaps still vital. They must be swerving to avoid the narrow field of fire the street provides, perhaps going for another barrier, and another entrance.*

Yes, they're pummeling an adjacent barrier. He hears the strain to climb. Singe can pray Molina has it covered, that the Ma'dan built it just as well, or better, to keep the beast out entirely. No, the deadly dish, Molina's platter, blasts off, a flight aborted transiently. Now the tracks on that T-72 chassis respond to the engine revving up. Fraser chases after it. He wants to put the built-in 60mm mortar to work against pockets of men and machines. They need attrition before the Nepalese fighter becomes comfortable that his recruits can handle them.

Camp William Eaton

Roger Gordian had imagined the Marines he'd supported in 1968, when they'd been stuck in a hole, pulling themselves through a dilemma the venerable French Paras had failed. But this wasn't Dien Bien Phu or Khe Sahn. There are no neighboring hills, and this, as TE Lawrence called it, was a land ocean. The sheer speed of the motorized trenching had surprised and alarmed the veteran/businessman, as did the overall

brilliance of the enemy's concealment and logistical abilities.

None of these things he could adequately articulate to his wife, Ashley, over the phone.

"I have the best people with me, and I'm safe under these thick walls," he'd told her. He'd be ok, because big strapping men stayed between him and the bad guys. Things look more spectacular on TV. "Remember those training films I showed you, Honey? They missed targets six feet in front of them, and when I took you out shooting that Saturday, remember? We both shot the centers of our targets. My guys, whom I have great faith in, are far better than we are."

A record flipped over in Nimec's jukebox. Tales of Brave Ulysses by Cream emanated from the speakers. He didn't recognize it, so he peeked over to see the title. It seemed oddly appropriate. Memories of songs had been one of the things he'd held on to when he'd been a guest of Uncle Ho's children so long ago. *Sunshine of Your Love* had actually been the song he'd been humming when the Christmas bombings of Linebacker II told him Americans like him were still thrashing his hosts. Hope was there, and hope is here. Strange that something as innocuous as blues or rock could transfigure into a meaningful motif such as this. He tried telling Ashley this. She understood.

He felt ready to crash from exhaustion, so he swore away from his coffee, which had waxed to tepidness atop a saucer. Instead, he nestled an almond wafer in the crook of two fingers and schlepped to his office cot. Phone in one hand, he guillotined a rationed slice, and commenced grinding it to fragments. The ex-combat pilot let an audible groan enter his phone receiver as he reclined on the mattress. He promptly clarified that his body bore no injuries, preempting a query from the wife.

“But I am in need of rest. I’ll call you back at,” he browsed his watch, “0800. Check the wall clock I have labeled Baghdad. I’ll be off duty, so if we have a tac alert and I forget, I’ll take your call. Don’t worry.”

He became fully relaxed at last, and asked the consequential questions about home. His daughter’s greyhounds were always a welcome topic of discussion, as were the tales of gang violence in San Jose, oddly enough. They seemed quaint and innocent to him, for he always delighted in drawing parallels between the so-called immigration threat of Mexicans in SoCal to those of Irish and Italians of the old mafia days. Like those two ethnic tides, they’ll move from the street mafia to the Catholic mafia, becoming the backbone of law enforcement and the military- then other portions of respectable American life, he said. She’d heard him say it all before, and allowed him to wax philosophical on the subject, as he often did.

“The Air Force, or Marines, or wherever they go, will shape them into fine gentlemen someday, much like this Molina kid I have here.” She may have felt differently, Roger did not know, but it had become a routine they played through sometimes. It always passed slowly. She asked him when he’d be back, as she always did, and it ached the same way, so he did as he must, he left a shallow print of hope she could entertain, but still tell the strict truth.

“I have the scheduled vacation coming up,” said he, imparting information Ashley knew about. Her sigh was merciful, not the killer she’d give to punish him. It was relaxing. She let him go.

“I love you, too.”

San Jose, California

“I bet I’m the only person in this room that had the sensible direction not to learn Visual Basic first,” muttered the young Jay Gridley, as he sat studiously with his laptop on an office floor. He’d distributed several compact disks of bootable operating systems, so his bewildered colleagues could once again make use of their locked machines. His machine was the only one available for chasing the intruder’s declared internet protocol number to a proxy server he’d worked through.

Jay considered himself fortunate to have reached it before the perp had erased the server’s records. Quickly, he reversed the Boolean logic of the admin password protection, the same way the perpetrator does, making true false, so that any incorrect password gave him entry to the administration records.

He found the intruder, and followed. It led to a router. Scanning for entrances, he found it impossible to enter through the firewalls, so he pinged it to find its physical location, then remotely accessed machines from different parts of the globe, so they could ping it as well.

“I have a physical location for this router. It’s located in Charlottesville, Virginia. I have the address pinned down, now I need you to call Charlottesville Police Department to take a look at it. Move!”

The network administrator flipped open his phone, paused, and searched Yellow Book for the number. Jay fed him some instructions on what to say, then immersed into his problem.

“I just hope they’ll know how to open a port once they get there,” he sighed, finding no open ports. Could it really be possible he won’t use this router again? Jay became positive, after seeing the router fade from the web.

“Boss,” hailed Jay, “when a patrol car gets there, he’ll need a bootable OS to get us around the login password. I need the address to the officer’s laptop in order to send it over.”

The boss held one finger up as if to say “wait a minute,” then relayed the request via a private message. Jay pasted it into the entry field, and entered, sending a .rar folder containing DSL (Damn Small Linux), and installed it.

“I just pray the officer can burn a CD and drop it in a tray,” he muttered, just before relaying an instruction through his boss to do just that.

“The officer arrived on scene,” said the boss. Jay noticed, as the officer typed a message saying so. “Fedora Core 2,” muttered the hacker, “he encrypted the desktop.” Smart, but not good enough. Jay knew of one buffer overflow exploit in Fedora 2. Jay dropped his own clone C compiler into the memory stack, and pointed the return address toward that, rather than the real one. Once again, his wonderful compiler reversed the Boolean logic on the security, making what was once secure the polar opposite; insecure. What came next was the perfect line for all hacker movies.

“I’m in.”

Outside Camp William Eaton

Soil soft. Soil loamy. Soil comforting. Movement bad, sky pretty. Drowsy thoughts are for civilians, while Terrance Arthur Peel is a soldier, a profession that also serves as a special verb. Soldiering is going about something in a hardcore manner. Someone who is soldiering is showing grit, animation despite pain and danger. Soldiering captures and protects stuff, therefore making soldiering a requisite for building civilization, and for altering the outside world. Dynamically altering the world, that is the essence of the

service Terrance Arthur Peel provides for his employers. That service of soldiering is what feeds Terrance Arthur Peel, what allows him to accumulate his own stuff. Soldiering requires animation, and the drive to continue motion until a geopolitical result is achieved for the employer.

T.A.P. found traction, resolve, to drag his body from the ditch, under a gap in the sentry gun screen. A collapsed guard tower, still smoking on the wrecked shack up top, granted cover from optics, and he discovered a dead zone between a berm and the camp's major concrete dome, a huge sports arena-sized structure.

His weariness had given him a tunnel vision of sorts, for he startled when a fighter tapped him on his clinched shoulder. He looked Somali, but lacking the wad of khat typical of that breed of fighter. He wore tinted goggles and the six-pattern fatigues of one of the sappers.

"Sir," said he, "I found their deep freezer room over here. This is where we're making the breech," he clarified. He led the British leader over. "Here's the vent where they release heat from it. Freon comes out here." He pointed. "My breaching charge can widen the gap enough to crawl through. I hope."

He pasted the big plastique circle where he pointed, adjacent to the vent, and jabbed a pencil in the middle. Ready.

"Fire in th' hole!"

The detonation of the plastique charge collapsed a thin copper layer, morphing it into a furious molten serpent, which jetted an angry flaming heat tip through the concrete and steel a decimal under the speed of light, displacing the barrier. Spalling of molten metal splattered against frozen meat, leaving burns, and ice cream, leaving delicious puddles. The hole left by the molten jet merged with the exhaust vent just enough to

fit one gangly Somali through.

“Nice,” said Tap, before sliding in. He raked one hand through an open ice cream carton, and savored the chill. It didn’t have to strike him that the Somali and he were nearly instinctively following perhaps the most important maxim listed in every American/western land forces field manual, that agile action trumps inaction, even if the most simplistic plan is implemented.

The Somali sapper worked his knife through the rubber seal, then slid a fiber optic camera through the opening.

“What’s your name?”

“Sir, I am named for the holy prophet Jesus.”

“I know that prophet, Jesus. In fact, I’ve spoken to him a few times, with the army chaplain.”

“Blessings be upon you,” said the Somali named after Jesus, while he finished his visual sweep of the hall, “the kitchen is right ahead. I see as many as four cooks going in and out in intervals.” He looked over his shoulder and grinned. “They are armed with kitchen utensils.”

The International (Green) Zone, Baghdad

By Mario Pazzi, International Press:

Lt. Commander Thad Blaine of the Air National Guard’s 103rd Fighter Wing out of Connecticut surveyed the green zone and Baghdad International Airport after the stunning assault. He made a number of modified figure-eight passes over the area the air strike had made the devastating swath, making a more precise evaluation than the initial reports had inferred.

He found that the damage appeared superficial from a couple thousand feet up, in correlation with war blogger Yoshi Von's internet dispatch, which observed that few of the early radio transmissions gave first-hand accounts of spotting dead among the rubble.

As reports continue to pile in, the Central Intelligence Agency confirms their wounded intelligence handler, who's name isn't being released, is no longer in critical condition. This man lost an arm while contacting an informant in one of the open streets. The wound was indeed caused by shrapnel. The green zone hospital is concurring with dispatches that the invading fighters had strafed civilians in Baghdad, and Presidential Envoy Paul Bremer confirms that a 30mm shell obliterated his laptop in the Al Rashid Hotel.

As for damage to critical infrastructure, the 14th of July Bridge is once again closed due to damage, the air traffic control tower took a hit of indeterminate damage, and was evacuated, and only the durable A-10 is cleared to takeoff, due to fears of structural damage to airframes. CENTCOM is hustling to clear a flight of F-16C fighter-bombers to cover the skies.

Meanwhile, insurgent mortars continue to fall on police precincts.

Track backs:

"Heh" - Instalkinghead

"Islamofascists strike our gated community with aircraft from Iran UPDATED!" - Anti Stupid Online Magazine of Opinion

Comments: 1056

Hits: 10,211

Charlottesville, Virginia

The officer thought back to criminal justice. Yep, He is within his right to search the room for weapons. The supreme court acknowledged the danger in not allowing an officer to conduct a search for safety's sake. He rifled around, but the room seemed immaculate. One thing stood out, a cardboard parcel box, with a return address to Santa Barbara, California.

Beowulf Swords. Whoever had put this computer and router here had ordered a sword once. I can think of a recent unsolved case involving a sword attack. He pressed the redial button on his cell.

"Hey, I found some forensic evidence here, guys. Could you look up some online purchase records for me? Thanks. Let me dial a friend in a nearby department." He dispatched it through the operator.

"Walther, Morrison, what kind of sword was it used in that hospital slaying? A Shirasaya? Thanks. Yeah, I found the cardboard box it was mailed in. Sure, you can come over! By the way, how's that spiteful little imp? Is he still a samurai fighting for love and gold?"

San Jose, California

"I now have the router's logs. He didn't manage to erase them before I got a screen capture of the records. I see everyone who has come through this network, and I can determine that our guy travels through Europe. Could he be a backpacker?" Jay Gridley let others gaze

"But look," pointed Tom, "the earliest in the records correlate with the latest location in that they approach the Caucasus Mountain Range. It is as if he backpacks from there to Dover, England, and back."

“Exactly,” concurred Jay, “our intruder seems to be a Russian or Chechen.” Jay swore. “That makes it difficult to arrest him, doesn’t it?”

A coworker shared a news article.

“Could this same guy have taken control of those satellites?” Jay wondered. “He’s definitely not just some script kiddie scribbling graffiti.”

Another man at his computer passed on sales records about the sword, while someone else found a Chechen patient on file at the hospital where the attack had occurred.

“A pancreatic cancer patient from Chechnya died the day of that attack. Get this, her husband had served as a member of Spetznez before moving into a black operations program.”

Jay took in the information, as the boss passed it on to the police.

“I don’t get it. Is he a Chechen separatist? Then why did he commandeer those satellites and drop them on caves around Peshawar, Pakistan? Would his Jihadist allies not be from there?”

It was then that the boss of all bosses in the company, Megan Breen, Roger Gordian’s chosen successor, walked in.

“Perhaps our guy is a Sufi and loathes the Wahabbi movement.” Jay nodded appreciatively. “In any case, we’ve found who is responsible for the attack.”

Jay contradicted her.

“Not quite. The router logs come with dates, too. Our Spaznet or whatever guy—” “Spetznez,” Breen corrected. “Whatever. I have him in the hospital parking lot while our cracker is in Dover. Now, unless he was hacking through a proxy while killing a street gang, or he’s an agent of our cracker.”

The Ma'dan Village

Mikhail Ruzhyo ended his commando crawl in the nadir of the bog, along a shelf. The muzzle break of his Abakan peaked just above the muck. A large brick-sized hole in one wall exposed an opening for one Marsh Arab machine gunner. He wore armor, and stayed back in his hole, making a difficult shot. The Chechen assumed Peter had signaled Grigory, for a sapper ran hard on one flank of the machine gunner's sight, inducing a forward lean. Mike took his double-tap shot, the type the Abakan rifle is known for, then hauling his form from the water in a mad scramble for a grove of grapes ahead. He dove, hitting a shallow spot under a palm.

A Ma'dan marksman, intent on revenge, leaned from a balcony, probing for a shot, but Peter, the Shooter, flashed his muzzle, caught the center of the Marsh Arab's mass, distracted him.

Time to run again. He did. Briefly, the interlocked field of fire abated. He crossed the open space, jumped the reed fence, and spread flat against the thick cinderblock wall giving the Marsh Arab militia so much protection.

Camp William Eaton

Less bloodshot after a few hours of aggravated sleep, Vince Scull's trademark basset hound eyes followed crosshairs to overlay the nape of a fleeing fighter's neck. Crunch.

They'd finally managed to toss a satchel charge close enough to the anti-mortar Phalanx gun to render it inoperable, but the forced retreat continued that morning, as armored vehicles drove in more platforms.

"We lost the bulldozer's right track this time," choked the analyst. "Now we almost have a stationary gun out there now. Alright, guys, we can't move the dozer ahead

anymore, and I don't want to move the other vehicles ahead to take a pounding. Rollie?"

The Cajun Grunted.

"I concur, but we still need to extend the perimeter. This would be the best time to get the hedgehogs out of the garage." The hedgehogs were six-wheeled trashcan-shaped androids with shotguns, and have been used by Sword for perimeter security in the past, but never before to lead an assault.

The last time Rollie had put them to use was at Moto Grosso Do Sol, Brazil, the International Space Station plant, where Siegfried Kuhl had completely changed his life, and the direction of the Sword team. It wasn't the fault of the robots. They'd shown ample muscle in that confrontation. No, the assaulting team had simply been too much, and the machines had been using non-lethal weapons while pitted against a live-fire commando team. They could manage a sweep-up operation.

Their previously non-lethal Remington 870 shotguns (with the Knoxx Industry's drum barrel magazine conversion kit) came to Iraq with flechette and buckshot rounds, and the highly disturbing dragon's breathTMpyro-spewing round as the last in the magazine. The shotguns came in tandem with a .223 carbine of similar size to the shotgun. These were either cut-down AR-15s or M4 carbines, and came installed in the bank where the water cannons of old were removed.

"Sounds like a plan. We've put the bodies of our personnel in too much danger already."

The Village

Mikhail Ruzhyo pulled the safety ring and hurled the heavy, old, devastating concussion grenade known as the Russian RKG-3 with the might his throwing arm could

muster. He ducked for cover a moment before the detonator ignited the charge. The tank destroying charge, not fired like an anticipated RPG-7 round, not deposited like a plastique charge, but agilely tossed into position like only a hand grenade could, fell against the interior of the mule-cart barrier, clearing a breach for Mike the Rifle.

His throw, performed parallel to the barrier, couldn't be countered by the defenders' coverage. He had them surprised. Strelock made it to cover behind the thickest palm, which gave him fairly safe coverage of the breach. Mike radioed him.

"Strelock, is it clear?"

"Da, but the armor is on the move."

"Roger. I want an assault team to take down the front door immediately."

"Roger. A strike team will take the front door." A Fahd backed to the breach. A rooftop Keffyia-wearing Arab, lying prone and propped on his elbows, landed an ineffective rifle grenade on the vehicle roof. Peter and Mikhail both snapped rounds at him.

All clear, the hulk's armored door pounced open, and out ran a stack of combatants in black shining SWAT battle dress, the lead man clutching a riot shield and a 10mm Glock model 29 in his right hand. The others followed with P90 submachine guns.

Vladimir had put considerable expense into outfitting the primary strike team.

A shotgun breached the door, and in charged the shielded leader. Ruzhyo didn't see the entrance, but knew exactly how the stack would move. The concussion grenade, the shouted orders, the boots climbing stairs, he recognized all those sounds, but the enemy's counter-fire, it remained muted.

"Fallback!"

One black suit sprinted out, heeding Ruzhyo's shouted plea, but no other, for a crushing semtex charge imploded the heavy cinderblock structure. Dust wafted out.

"We lost our strike team," reported the Chechen, as he sprinted into the house.

Inside

He moved among the black shells cluttering the floor. These were no longer people, thanks to the wave compression from the wired charges. The slick garnet splattering also didn't draw his interest. What interested him was victory.

"Guard the door," said he, dropping a rope through the window. He keyed his radio again.

"Strelock, climb up here, and bring The Hero with you."

He tied the rope down and searched for a tunnel way. He trotted into a dark bedroom. The light bulb had exploded under the pressure, like many other objects. His eyes looked for crookedness, and found a wooden chest not aligned. It had been moved.

Brusquely, the Chechen kicked it aside, fell to both knees, and pounded the floor. It bucked. Eagerly, he dug ten fingertips around a loose tile, and discovered the tunnel he sought.

"I found what I was looking for," shouted he, one beat after hearing Peter's footfall.

"Found what?"

"A tunnel. They evacuated down here." Job Geroj joined them in the room.

"I need someone to venture in," stated the Chechen, "but I don't want it to be a complete suicide mission. Do we have any Bangalore torpedoes?"

"Right here," said the Armenian, displaying a long thin tube for the Spetznez officers. "I can snake this over, and really surprise them."

“Make it so.”

Meanwhile

Above in the giant desert cerulean plane, Toby’s UH-60 plummeted under the 14.5mm guns of an enemy technical. He cradled Rose as the rotary-winged airframe struck the gravelly desert floor, snapping away the tail, and sending the body into a terrifying tumble.

When motion receded, he recalled no details of the fall, save his cradling effort, which, after peering into his arms, he deemed successful.

“Are you hurt?” Rosencrans pushed her weight against his arm, groaned.

“I’m dizzy. If we’re still in Indian Country, we’ll need to call in help fast.”

Toby felt around as the blinding dust settled from the rotor wash.

“Yeah. I don’t know where we are, exactly. Hey pilot-!”

The Navy man witnessed the slumped head, and felt for a pulse.

“Stop touching me- nasty!” The chopper pilot, Toby called him a helo pilot, chuckled, unbuckled, and struggled to free his chest from the pressing steering column.

“We lost our machine gunner.” Toby swiveled his head for the voice, it was the lawyer’s, and it sounded frightened. “He fell out- I don’t know where he is!”

The bird lay on one side, so Gairden had to pull his body over the side to reach the ground.

“Move your legs, Chet.” After making it over the lip, he looked around, saw the dusty wake of a vehicle. “Tangos incoming,” said he curtly, “find someone on the tac frequencies, and bring in help!”

Camp William Eaton

“Hello, America, this is Geraldo Gutierrez reporting to you from above the battle space in a just lovely nimble Little Bird helicopter, piloted by a former member of our venerable Marine Corp. Hoorah!”

Paul Evens took to the air as a gunship, carrying only the reporter and cameraman with him. With rockets and miniguns, he pledged to quickly suppress any flare-ups, saving the hedgehog robots from doom, but until that time, he circled idly, letting these reporters get great exclusive footage, and an interview.

Geraldo: “So, Marine, you served in Cobra gunship missions in three conflicts?”

Paul: “Four.”

Geraldo: “Four? Where?”

Paul: “Operation Just Cause, 1989, Panama, Operation Desert Shield/Desert Storm, 1991, Operation Restore Hope, Somalia, 1993, and Operation Enduring Freedom, Afghanistan, 2001, and those were just the ones with active combat. Cobra missions dotted the globe in the nineties in all sort of peacekeeping missions.”

This felt right, flying the little bird helicopter, supporting soldiers in Southern Iraq. It was almost like 1991 again. He saw retreating enemy, as providence would have it. This was how it was supposed to be.

“Down a bit south from here, I demolished the whole Republican Guard over ten years ago. They were bad guys, and we’d completely punished them for looting the good people of Kuwait. I honestly believe what we were doing was dispensing justice on that highway. They weren’t innocent, not by a long shot. I just wish we had a shot at Saddam and his palaces, but it didn’t happen then, and I had to wait over a whole decade for a chance to make things right. So, here I am today.”

Paul gently pitched the nose down with the cyclic control, then snap-turned to give the cameraman a chance to shoot still frame from the port side.

“Those should work well in a magazine,” the pilot smugly commented. “No other photographer will have footage of R2D2 fighting the tangos, I can tell you that.”

Indeed. The camera captured strobe lighting and pulsating lasers emanating from the bots, almost as if they took on the burden of making a rave party, not war.

“Those lighting effects may cause convulsive reactions similar to epileptic seizures from the right range,” explained Paul, “and those effects are coupled with sound waves inducing similar nausea in the stomach. We think our robots can then pretty much run over them, as long as they don’t have countermeasures.”

“Now watch this.”

He switched his radio frequency, and shouted what sounded to Geraldo as grid coordinates. He wondered if he actually witnessed the calling in of destructive artillery.

“See those cars?” The marine pointed, briefly removing one hand from the collective. “They go boom!”

Seconds passed. Geraldo saw no shells.

“Wait. . .”

Gray and orange bloomed over the Nissan trucks. The television journalist just hoped it looked spectacular on tape.

“Those pickups were technically technicals, roving platforms for crew-served heavy guns that would have outranged hedgehog robots. I guess those in charge didn’t cover that contingency, and that’s why I’m here, to do just that.”

A moment later, the radio squelched.

“Come in, stranger,” urged Paul nonchalantly.

“(Hiss) Mayday! (hiss)”

Huh?

Rollie interjected on the radio.

“Evens, that’s the chopper that came in to arrest you last night. Can you do an emergency extraction?”

Visibly to Geraldo’s eyes, he shrugged.

“Sure thing, Boss,” he quickly glanced to his rear, “you two,” shouted he, “I have some rifles tied down there. We’re dropping into a hot zone, so the need may arise where you’re needed. Just don’t shoot those Navy guys!”

In The Cafeteria

Peel followed Jesus. Both handled Ak74M 5.45x39mm automatic rifles, the standard arm of the Russian military, with the bayonets fixed. They’d get close.

An explosive bolt freed the freezer door. The Somali Jesus stormed for the kitchen, moving his muzzle over the chest of the nearest chef. Claret plumes jutted out to the soundtrack of staccato hammering. As one garnet-dyed chef folded over, the one he eclipsed let slip a surgical steel knife against the sapper’s chest, not phasing his trigger-finger. Another crumpled, while a third chef flared a grease fire...not phasing the sapper’s trigger-finger.

He leaped beyond the prostrate chefs, entering the grand mess, where tables lined up with a dining crowd. Peel and the sapper Jesus fanned apart, raking opposing ends of the open space, while unarmed victims dropped with overturned tables, ducking low under the barrage.

Both their magazines ran dry, and they slipped in fresh spares, before resuming their reaping. Peel walked his fire down the column of prone bodies, stepping in alignment with them, where the tables no longer shielded them. The Somali did the same.

The Englishman overheard his comrade praising God. Peel wondered if his Jihadist friend would claim a bonus in his afterlife. Few of his ilk stand up well to organized militaries in straight combat. He chunked a smoke grenade to the entrance, where security guards just made their way over.

“Jesus, take cover!” The Somali’s grenade, a fragmentation type, landed behind the smoke. Figuring overwhelming force trumped the need to conserve, Peel contributed an excess grenade.

They moved beneath the smoke, uncertain of the aegis the shroud provided, but stretching their asset for every datum of value. Peel considered taking a human shield, but shook away the temptation. It would only slow the assault, as ad hoc and desperate as it was. He’d closed the distance to mere meters from the double door mess exit, and realized the security had temporarily fallen back. The British commando could fix that.

“Alright, Mogadishu Man, rake over these bodies to make certain they’re dead!”

Bang. Bang. Bang. Bang. Bang. Bang. Bang. Bang. Bang. Bang. Bang. Bang. Bang.

Peel kept low as they rushed in. His bayonet in his left hand, and his field knife in his right, he plunged forward into soft guts. The wounds made sucking sounds, then leaking ones, and two faces, staring at his Anglo callousness, turned ashen.

“We don’t have much time,” pronounced the Englishman, as his Somali associate joined his side. He pointed at the sapper’s fiber optic scope. “Check the corners.”

“Yes, Sir.”

Caucasus Mountains

Zemya’s text message carried merit in brevity, reading simply “Wall breached.” Minutes later, “Ruzhyo seized house.” Finally came “helicopter down.” The threads were tying together tightly. The setback was the camp. The Sword personnel had managed a counter-offensive in the dawn’s early light, shunting away a flush of high-end military expenses and Iranian armor. They had sailed over the sand ocean, depositing hired militiamen all night, an endless wealth of them, no doubt leaving the desired impression on the Western public.

But still, he’d expected more from that Englishman Peel. He expected close-quarters fighting inside, and a breaching of the reactor core.

A message from the instant messenger:

Sheik Baby: “The batter (Peel) is in.”

Vladimir typed back.

Wheelman: “Wot do u mean?”

Sheik Baby: “Hez n da batter’s box (the compound).”

Wheelman: “R U serious!”

Sheik Baby: “I’m (positive sign).”

Wheelman: “Ur plus?”

Sheik Baby: “I’m positive”

Sheik Baby: “Oops! Hit enter there! I’m positive he’s personally inside.”

Wheelman: “Gr8!”

Sheik Baby: “He’s in with a sapper, but he’s a n00b :(”

Wheelman: "I C. BRB."

Sheik Baby: "OK."

Looking deep into the abyss of twenty-four hours news coverage of smoldering sorrow concentrated on a riverbed, the Russian-turned-Chechen mentally retraced his operations. Iran was a practical dark spot for western human intelligence, so he doubted very much any trace-back of today's operations back to him, and his hit on Gordian's San Jose operation ranked no higher than a cyber crime. No, the rods of God he'd pummeled into the mountainsides of Peshawar signaled to the Americans and British that the most powerful movement in Chechnya had rejected the standard of exporting barbarism into the entire world. Those slugs from space could have just as easily have erased Los Angeles from the planet, but the Chechen had declined that slaughter.

No, as far as the intelligence community is concerned, the American leadership are indebted to the Chechen for wiping out the headship of their enemy instead.

Ah, don't escape into reflection now. Only a few hours more. Next on the agenda is-

"Sonja, let's have Darjeeling tea on the veranda. That sounds pleasant, wouldn't you agree?" His secretary-bodyguard-maid raised one eyebrow under the pane of her horn rims. Vlad noticed the gesture.

"Here we are beside the Elbrus. Let's get out of this lodge and enjoy it!" She relented. Cabin fever had been robbing her vitality, she knew. She gave a vigorous shrug and stretched her upper limbs before holstering the pistol she kept on the desk.

Plenkanhov watched her pad over to the gas stove, where she readied a kettle for brewing. He'd hoped they'd be able to share lodging on the pristine Southwest Russian glade for a longer stay, but, alas, someone out there managed to connect too many dots. Though the great gambler he was, Vladimir held a firm respect for a few able minds

within states hostile to his greater aims. But.. this domain comes in a secluded form.

He could be extradited, anyway, especially if the Americans link him to Chechen separatist movements. *Such links have already been found*, thought he, seeing the story of the hospital attack leaked in the Baltimore Sun Online.

Chechnya would be beyond their clenching span, but still possibly under the hard boot of the Russian war machine.

Clatter. *The tea, it has steeped.* Sonja, as if following the customary art of tea brewing, daintily poured two cups atop two saucers on one tray. Dainty, she couldn't have that describe her, not if she were to be his closest bodyguard through this ordeal.

Wheelman: "Heads up, you have A-10s on a short ETA, and some Royal Navy Harriers further away."

Sheik Baby: "Roger. We picked up the Hog."

Wheelman: "Good luck, and happy hunting."

Sheik Baby: "May the force be with you, Allah willing :)"

"May the force be with you, friends," echoed the hacker, signing off. Next on the agenda, Darjeeling tea and Sonja on a sky lift. Bliss.

Camp William Eaton

Peel listened attentively, hearing the patter of boots retreating from his bouncing grenade.

"I'm with you, Jesus," shouted he, pursuing the Somali down the bright corridor.

"I got it," proclaimed the lanky black man, clutching the grenade- which still housed the pin and spoon. The Englishman congratulated him, and then fixed a stick to a barricaded dorm door. Barricades all over dropped as klaxons nagged the system to

lock up.

“Fire in the hole!” Smoke and clattering signaled the emergence of the blasted open door. Fearing the enigmatic shroud, TAP sprayed the room, as he did in a previous fashion, one room down. Nothing stirred, but still he kept attentive crosshairs weaving at torso-height.

“Clear!” He declared.

Meanwhile, at the village

A dark and narrow environment enclosed on all sides by dust and humus surrounded Job Geroj, the hero. His name, by any rational standard, wasn't a misnomer, for those limited only to the minimum standard of placing the collective above the individual wouldn't voluntarily crawl through this narrow tunnel, knowing the risks. The Bangalore torpedo, which he had angling toward the lip of the tunnel, provided a mitigating factor.

He rammed one connecting sieve up another end, lengthening his clearing device, then, straining, gave it a push. It slid, lifting from the hole. The nose sleeve crested, leaned, almost shaking free of the other attachments.

Then, he gently affixed an empty pipe attachment, and pushed again. Then came the excitement. Backpedaling in a dark tunnel. In this situation, the nightmare was much worse going backward than forward. He'd managed to feel for booby traps with his hands, which came as a natural process, but in reverse, he experienced the reality of having to feel for potential traps- those he may have missed- through the soles of his feet.

Having to, nuts! Instead, he took on irreverence toward danger, backpedaling quickly, then dropping prone, with the detonator in his hand. Only a few feet of thin air and a

Kevlar KM2 helmet shielded him from the blast he inflicted.

The chamber punctuated the sonic rupture, shaking his inner ear. Vertigo ensued. Direction grew distorted, and whole clumps of dirt suffocated him through his facial orifices, despite his foresight in wrapping his features in a wet bandanna. Pressure weighted on his back. A partial collapse occurred, despite his clever engineering of a modest rocket stage in his torpedo, which popped many of his extensions out of the tunnel. Even so, the hero, the Armenian hero of the mercenary world, willed his body to reverse his insertion into the darkness. The Rifle called.

“Hero!” He groaned back an unintelligible mutter, then gritted his teeth to resume a forward locomotion. One hand dangled around his waistband, managing to firmly clutch the Yarygin pistol he desired. It came to the fore, over the shattered remnants of his helmet, which he let fall before his shoulders.

The Yarygin Pya he’d had roughly a year to become used to, although on hits he’d usually carried western guns, for that was the region of the world he operated. Here was different. The region was flush in ordnance of a few various calibers, and everything was either of a NATO standard, or a separate Warsaw bloc size. Ergo, Makarov or Luger Parabellum pistol ammunition were the norms. That suited him just fine.

So dank, so dusty, and so dim was his ambiance, but his identity remained the hero, so he trudged until lighting hit his retina, and let his CR gas grenade clenching hand dangle over the earthen lip.

POV Overhead

The description of tear gas as a gas is actually a misnomer, for it is actually a solid dispersed in small particles- like ricin or anthrax, but the dispersal as a particulate mist

renders the physical differences practically meaningless. The particular agent wafting in from the market floor was actually crystalline in nature, and disastrous when in contact with humans.

Walid, a boy of a young age, coughed through his red-and-white checkered Keffiya, which he attempted blockage of the ‘gas’ with, while his lean reed-bender hands felt for the noxious source. They brushed a cylinder.

“How perfect and glorified Allah is,” exclaimed the boy, as those basket-weaving hands clutched the cylinder. “Now be heroic before Molina and God,” he urged, but, it refused to budge!

“Allahu ackbar!” He prayed, as a figure lurched from the hole, pistol-whipping him aside the temple, shocking the frontal lobe dead.

“No, he isn’t great,” gasped the blistering Armenian, “I don’t believe it!” Nauseous from inhalation, he swiftly stubbed his toe at the boy’s target, sailing to a far corner, among a crate of ammunition boxes, and a single torn apart body. He whipped furiously at his running nose, shut his blurry eyes, and felt his way back down.

Ruzhyo’s Tunnel Entrance

“We’re losing momentum,” the Chechen declared, impatiently leering at the second-hand of his Rolex. “I’m bringing him back.” So he kneeled, flashing a handheld beam down the tube.

“Stop that,” protested a hoarse throat. The hero returned, with a completely swollen face. Red puffiness circumscribed his eyes. Secretions dribbled from his nose to the bandana, which then lay wrapped across his neck. It was the physical testimony of the existence of a savage blistering agent. CR, more irritating than even the CN no longer

used for riot control, still sold as a less-than-lethal law enforcement tool. Considering, someone making a self-inflicting use of it must be acknowledged for going well above and beyond.

“Men, behold. This is why we call him The Hero!” Mikhail waved his hand to gesture at the Armenian, before lowering that hand to lift him up. Job graciously latched on.

“Oh, I’m sorry!” Mike nervously released him, ashamed at shifting the punji stake jutting from the erstwhile tunnel rat’s hand.

A medical technician climbed through the upstairs window to treat the dibenzazepine (CR) sufferer, while Mikhail commanded additional militants to storm the tunnel.

“Argh!” The medic screamed. “Scorpions!” Amid the chaos of men clamoring, a shriek about a phobia-inducing creature could break down the mishmash of units cobbled into the house.

“Apply the leech therapy, and cigarette the suckers!” A non-smoker, the Chechen still carried a “loosie” for anyone he may share a trench with. He fanned a chrome Zippo under it, getting that flame to nibble at the tip.

“Here,” he passed it over, then death-glared at his nascent tunnel rats, “reach your objective now!”

Overhead

This is the hot moment, when the Hughes 500 type helicopter, the OH-6 Little Bird, dives to make an emergency pickup. The former Chief Warrant Officer, Paul Evens, busted to Sergeant Major Paul Evens, forced the stick violently forward, while applying hard rudder left, to get an equivalent of a fighter bank. He peered hard at the crash site,

taking in the light trucks and the rocky cover for possible dangers, as he settled into a low hover close to the ground.

“Get out, I’m attacking!” He shouted loudly, but the reporter and cameraman didn’t seem to understand.

“I’m making an attack run! Danger! Stay safe, and get out!” The reporter, finally understanding, cupped both hands over his mouth.

“Roger! Semper fi, brave marine!” As they hopped off, Paul pitched up the collective, generating lift, a process that whipped dust at the camera.

“Hoorah! Is there anything more exciting than that? That man is going in to save-hold on, did he say attack run? What if? No, he wouldnt!” He groaned.

“This story bleeds humanity. Out of the air, you can feel the grit of this battle. It is only exacerbated by the actual, non-metaphysical dust swept up from that rotor wash. Those rocket pods- holy fatwa! Hey, pan the camera at this! The olive green form of the tank buster dropping to the deck. No doubt about it, our marine pilot isn’t in this alone. Guns are opening up from those light pickups out there. I distinctly remember covering the fighting of technicals-civilian vehicles tricked out with heavy weapons- in Lebanon in my early days as a field reporter, and again in the tragedy of Somalia. This man, this Paul Evens, saw the latter. Look at the A-10’s gun rip! Wow!”

The racket of roaring General Electric TF-34-100/A turbo-fan engines pulled attention from the prowling helicopter to a giant titanium shape diving in, with one fierce rotary cannon spewing depleted uranium chunks at civilian-model pickup trucks. Then the pilot, Lt. Commander Thad Blaine of the Air National Guard’s 103rd Fighter Wing, pulled back the stick, applied rudder hard left, topped out, and sloped back for a second pass. In the process of pulling up, an MK82 conventional five hundred pound bomb fell

from a hard point, shattering the will of those below.

The following pass, from a varied angle of attack, razed the desert with the seven barrels of death. His wingman 'crossed the t' from a ninety degree angle, pocking the floor with AN/GAU-8 30mm Avenger power and his own bomb load.

From the periphery, smoky corkscrews leapt skyward, but lacked the sentience to pursue the armored birds. Thad Blaine graciously applauded as that mercenary helicopter jumped into the fray, loosing duel 2.75 inch rockets at the origin of the smoke trails. M134 'miniguns,' gatlings small in stature compared to the A-10's allotment, oozed from both flanks of the rotary bird, adding superfluous brutality to the concealing rock outgrowth from which the airborne RGPs came.

"Oh Lord, he's flying over. We saw guys with shoulder-fired rockets, and he's flying over. The tail boom- he'll expose the tail rotor!" Geraldo jabbered nervously. "I feel bad-"

Sure enough, through the magnification of the camera lens, shapes of men with the familiar RPG-7 unfolded from a crouch, taking aim. Becoming immolated.

"Where'd that cauterizing deluge come from? Thick, gelatinous napalm suffused those pitiful souls! I can't fathom where- the tail boom! I didn't notice, but a canister must have tumbled from the little bird's tail. The cleverness that fiend dealt them!"

As the fuel died to embers, Paul snap-turned in 45 degree compartments, sweeping with 7.62mm shells differing rock outcroppings for brief moments, while descending above the crash site. The woman, Rosencrans, snaked an arm around the out-hanging board, a full moment before receiving a desperate boost from a perspiring man below.

Tangos, assault rifles slung loose, ran desperately, fanatical desperation encompassing their bodies as auras. Others, at the back of the leapfrog, set their muzzles alight,

worrying not about self-preservation. The woman lay prostrate on the deck, inside, grappling for traction. Paul said nothing, he only held the hover, while the UH-60 pilot, or co-pilot, scraped his hands around whatever would latch to him. His chest flourished burgundy with liquid, while his skin devolved to a pallor.

The male Navy officers, a slightly rotund one, and a poster model, triggered their rifles repeatedly, as the remaining pilot body-slammed the out-hanging board. Paul hastily hit the collective hard, surging fifty feet, leaving a swirling wake for a bundling of deadly corkscrews.

“Toby! Chet!” The woman shouted as Paul pressed the rudder completely starboard. He had the canopy fixed over the tangos when he depressed the rockets. The sand erupted thrice and again, hoisting limbs and meat into the air.

Then he reversed the collecting, plummeting hurriedly. Two hearty thumps indicated the packages hit the board, and a cursory glance confirmed two humanoid shapes clinging on.

“Six are good to go,” he called, punching the cyclic for forward thrust, even as he purged his rocket pods. “There, now I think I have the capacity to retrieve those reporters. Pilot, take the seat beside me,” said the marine, while he accelerated due north for where he’d dispensed of Geraldo and the cameraman. He hailed the A-10 flight’s call sign.

“I’ve retrieved all the living. Now I need to retrieve my two journalists on my heading Due North. Do you copy?”

Thad Blaine, the Air National Guardsman, expressed disbelief.

“You butthead! You should have said so earlier! I copy. You have two unmarked journos abandoned in the open Due North.”

“Roger that, they have ArmaLites- AR-15s, and a handcam,” said Paul. He sounded weary, expressing fully the amount of hours he’d been out in the field. If he’d felt up to it, he may have used an expletive. “They have some tangos bearing on them, at least a pair fixed in a fire-fight, and they’re too close for me to spray and pray. Here goes.”

You must believe, Neo, there is no spoon. He stared down the windshield-mounted optical sight, finger ready to rip open one last satisfying burst. *You can save Morpheus.* Tracers crossed over his sighting, raking up the thigh of one, lying prone with an RPK-74, then twitch! Stitched the Dragunov-bearer. He noticed in passing it was the SVU bullpup version, very new.

Once more, the collective cut power, descending the five-blade craft inches from sifting pebbles. Tobias Gairden, Lt. Commander big strapping CIS detective, triggered a warning blast one-handed with his M16A2, using his free set of fingers to hoist Geraldo Gutierrez over the board and (empty) rocket pod, then released a more accurate trio within two MOA (minutes of angle) at a menacing figure, a silhouette in the shape of an airman’s death.

“I might have missed!” Gairden repeated his fusillade, reconnaissance by fire, but retrieved no retaliation. Aiming again, at a semicircle of perhaps a head, his body bucked under the negative gee force of Paul’s flying. The force had him wrestling for seating. On the ledge of the floor, death was neighborly; just a quick drop away.

Fire-seeding commenced, as magnesium hot starry decoys pitched from the three birds. Flares, almost the thickness of a gnat swarm, smothered heat signatures for the three metallic flying bodies, depressing the Strela missile shooters like Toby’s terrifying target.

“Hang on, I’m jinking for your safety.”

Chapter 23

The Gordian Knot Tied

‘To make war upon rebellion is messy and slow, like eating soup with a knife’ –TE Lawrence

Summer arrived early in West Texas. The grass, parched and tan, snapped audibly under the heels of various boot designs. Some boots were lizard skin narrow-toed high-heeled footwear of the cowboy design, while others wore lace-up wide steel-toed construction boots, with patterned soles.

All the men wore the similar flair of orange vests, a fashion utilized for safety. At the lead of the congregation, the waffle-griddle pattern of a 10EEE boot kicked over a fire ant mound, causing quite a commotion for one little hive. The man with the mahogany boot passed on, willingly ignorant of the destruction he caused. He’d disturbed many ants in his life of over sixty years, as well as the dictators that ruled them. Even so, his

focus was on the mallard, an avian creature washing feathers in a terribly thick green pond scum of algae.

After a time, he allowed his mind to refocus on the conversation around him. A sometimes-rival spoke to him directly, appealing for a favor, a heavy one. The man in the wide boots wasn't a Mafioso, and it sure as certain wasn't the day of his daughter's wedding, but he patiently listened anyway. It was his job to consider requests such as this, although not officially. The *de jure* obligations of his job were few, cast a tie-breaking vote once in a blue moon, and survive, that was all the job really required. Not that those things were unimportant, but he felt- no, he knew- his substantial acumen entitled him the right to expand his responsibilities, and he did. This irked many, which only served as a bonus for the Master of Arts holder from a small state university.

The man requesting help had a similar background in life, except for his extended stay as a 'guest' of the Vietnamese government. From there, the paths of the two men forked considerably, but even so, that man asked Richard Bruce Cheney to relate to his predicament.

"Gordo, you're asking that the President of the United States pardon a murderer of a United States citizen. Not only that, but you're asking that I recommend that he do that during an election year. I can't make that decision on the spot, and you haven't yet persuaded me." The man rested his tool, swiped his brow. "We generally frown on pardoning murderers, and yours didn't murder some thug-"

"He killed a child rapist!" The secret service detail recoiled, the small press corps perked up, and Cheney's face turned livid.

"I know, but we don't just summarily execute our own people. Look, I like your guy. He seems great, but you're asking a lot from the Oval Office." Roger Gordian

didn't seethe, though that may have been his first inclination. Instead, he found solace in his lungs. He took in more than breath, he pulled inspiration, thoughts, and order. Threads of streaming data weaved into the structure of a narrative, a construct to better advocate his cause.

"Sir, Mister Vice President, I want to tell you the story of what exactly happened at our camp. Do you recall the brief from the Naval Criminal Investigative Service officers, Rosen-whatever and that Toby guy?" The man gave a curt affirmative, then surveyed the wetland's reed stalks.

"That was some heroic stuff," he grouched, "we truly don't appreciate what our helicopter pilots do, not, enough, you know. I grant you he deserves a service medal, his status as a private military contractor albeit disqualifying him."

"Thank you, Sir. I hope-" Everyone paused at the cross-talk between the VP and Gordian.

"Sorry," said the veep, "I just wanted to tell you I'll call the House Speaker to nominate a Congressional Gold Medal of Honor. We'll also lend recommendation for a Presidential Medal of Freedom, and an Exceptional Civilian Service Award." Roger thanked him.

"You're very kind, Sir, but there's more. Gutierrez is finishing his documentary now, and I understand it fully discloses what happens next. This story isn't coming off like water," he laughed, "it just gives me some fits. He leapt from the little bird at the end, but he kept going."

The erstwhile hunting troop congregated for story time.

Camp William Eaton, April, 2004

Paul Evans' rotor whirled over the wreckage of our base, as you know, when his radio sounded. The ground told him to be advised the base had been infiltrated. Paul, being the inquisitive man he is, asked where they entered. Rollie Thibodeau entered the chat to say it was a wall breach on the Northeast side.

Evans surveyed the wall, found the hole, and asked the military black hawk pilot to take the controls, which he did. Paul then ordered the man to take it low, and allow him to disembark. Much of this was in the public record, but that's where it ends, while reality kept rolling. What happened next will become public knowledge only when the documentary is released.

While the others raced to the helipad, Paul stepped through that hole, a loaded M16A2 cradled loosely, favored mostly on his right forearm. He felt the freon coolant of the walk-in refrigerator as he felt for the enemy in his environment. The climate shift felt stunning, he said, and I can understand that. The ice cream, he noticed, had not yet fully melted, it was so frigid, but his metabolism rebelled against freezing up, and he stalked out the steps the enemy had taken.

He hailed Rollie on the radio network from his Motorola, which he kept fastened in a pouch of his webbing, informing the party of his entrance. Rollie acknowledged, warning him that a fire team including Nimec, Ricci, Pokey, and Braun were coming up from his left flank. He understood, and replied that he was proceeding. Rollie asked him to hold on, but Paul briskly rebuked him.

"We don't have time!" He kept the butt plate firmly against his right shoulder as he marched into the cluttered and gored kitchen. His trained eye peered down the Trijicon Advanced Combat Optical Gunsight, taking in the macabre scene of the dining- or mess-area. He moved ahead as wounded pressed on the open wounds of other wounded, as a

few with sucking chest wounds liquidly gasped.

“Rollie, tell me you have a medical team following the fire team, over,” said he, as he habitually checked the selector switch, confirming he had the 3-round burst selected.

“A corpsman and a nurse are wheeling ahead a robotic rifle on a cart right now, closing behind them,” he confirmed. “Hey, Evans? The reactor room reported that the enemy is retreating. Keep your head up, buddy.” The marine patted his Motorola’s receiver, muttered an affirmative, and moved to a kneeling position, just outside the cafeteria doors. It exposed much of his left torso, but that was Paul, living dangerously. He kept the tritium reticles on an imaginary torso, waiting for a flesh-and-blood target to creep in. He regulated his breathing, calming his pulse, clearing his eyes, and flexing his index finger to deliver three foot-pounds gently.

It has been said that Evans can dry-fire a pistol with a wine flute safely balanced on top, his squeeze is so gentle, and that might just be true. He certainly squeezed the trigger well when a sapper turned that corner. His reaction time must have astonished the African, if he had time to register his own death at all. It may have been painless. No, I don’t believe that. The nerves destroyed within the temporary or permanent cavities formed by those three 5.56mm rounds must have inscribed that shock as his last memory.

Paul heard a shouted cry of “Jesus” following his shot, disturbing him. Invoking the name of Jesus seemed so out of place in a battle space made up mainly of Moslems, rather than Christians, and it stunned him. A blue-on-blue? Has he made a grievous friendly-fire incident?

“Unknown, Evans. Keep fighting, that’s an order.” Rollie reiterated that no known friends were prowling the right flank halls. Decision time.

“Put down your weapon!” A tall shadow cast around the corner. The gun silhouette, AK-74! Enemy, he is my enemy. The repo man from Arkansas told me he smiled while watching the shadow poke around the corner. The panel ceiling lighting made the close-quarters fighting easy. He savored the advantage. “Surrender now! Put down your weapon!”

The other man froze in a standoff, but kept his primary weapon ready. But then, his arm swung underhanded, Paul saw, and it lobbed something, he knew not what for certain. No pin and spoon, he noticed, holding ground. He’s coming. The shadow merged with flesh coiled around a rifle. It fired off balance, as the enemy shifted sideways to plant his sinister foot.

Paul, knelt firmly, planted the tritium over the torso, and loosed another trio, dropping another body. His knees straightened, popping as he stood, but it proved only a minor bother. Load-bearing harnesses on an aging body causes such things.

Standing, he kept his rifle trained on the fallen foe. He trained his rifle uncomfortably with one hand as he thumbed the radio.

“Rollie, I have two down here. I’m moving ahead.”

“Wait,” protested the Louisiana native, “are they dead?” Paul regarded them.

“Unsure,” he declared, noticing the second one didn’t seem wounded in any vitals. “I have to go. The reactor is heating.”

“What? Paul, what are you going to do about the reactor? We have a robot for this!”

“No time,” breathed the repo man, sprinting, “I’m going to staunch those leaks.”

West Texas

“This sounds a little too much like that Star Trek movie,” another hunter interrupted abruptly, “The Wrath of Khan. You know, where Spock repairs the reactor by himself?” The VP chortled.

“Or that boomer accident Ivan had, eh, Ryan?” Jack, the only former president in the group, nodded. “Those accidents happen, Dick,” said the only man excused from addressing Cheney as Mister Vice President, “we never had a reactor leak on that boomer I-uh-served on, but the Vilnius Schoolmaster did impart some information about what the northern fleet went through. I also watched K19 like everyone else.” He grinned as the subordinate to his professional descendant chased a heart pill with diet Sprite.

“We all get some of our ideas from the movies, that’s just a sad product of modernity, Jake. Gordo, the bad guys reached your little reactor and damaged it?” The story resumed.

“That’s right, they managed to, uh, scuttle some of the coolant piping. We use gas coolant, carbon dioxide, which can be hazardous in large amounts. We have a gas-cooled fission reactor designed by South Africans, and it is a fairly compact and safe make. But there’s more to the story.”

Camp William Eaton, April, 2004

The Galco holster loosed the SIG P2020 pistol fast, letting Peel squeeze two rounds out fast, grouped tightly at the white guy’s lower back. Coming from the hip, the placement earned his acceptance. That will do.

The man didn’t gasp a sigh, Peel observed, but collapsed to his knees, then fell prostrate. Around there, coiled beside him, Jesus, the Somali. Dead, reckoned the Britain, he appeared to have bled out. No, that heaping khat pile, wadded in one cheek,

rose and fell. His mind aswirl, Peel recklessly dragged him past the mess doors as a fire team appeared in pursuit.

He felt the dragged weight rise behind him, an almost out-of-body uplifting in his arms. Jesus had risen.

"I'm glad you've come back to the living, Jesus," he quipped, "I wasn't carrying that weight all the way." Jesus forgave him, then dispensed his remaining magazine at the figures diving to parallel sides of the room. Terrance took more precise aim one-handed. The two lead figures fanned apart alarmingly fast, so abrupt, so swift, Peel felt his last moments were imminent. If those were to be his last moments, he'd stay close to Jesus.

"We've made the kitchen," he wheezed, draining his magazine at a popped-up head, "try to run," he instructed, inserting his replenishing load.

"No," the Somali objected, "martyrdom I hadn't planned, nor is it what I seek, but..." he chopped Peel's wrist, wrestled the pistol, and elbow-prodded his ribs..."I..." bang... 'guard your running."

The sapper, first in, last out, all bravery, didn't register the Englishman's shrug as he sprinted away.

West Texas

"Two in the back like that- man- that must've left a deep purple welt all over." The former SecDef pivoted one foot over that broken ant mound, nervously wobbling apart the whole infrastructure. "That should keep anyone but a rugged teen down for a spell."

"Yeah," seconded Jack Ryan, "that type of licking kept me down in my day, but your guy leaped back up?" Jack simulated a golf swing out of boredom, and to loosen the tension in his back. Don't get stigmata now, Jack. He stepped to and fro on the parched

grass, snapping stems underfoot. Roger let the conversation settle, then resumed.

“No, he got up, and when Nimec and Ricci reached him, he was tenderized and naked.”

“Naked?”

“Unclothed, with all his fibers fastened around piping. He had the reactor cooled, almost miraculously. Geraldo was there, danger close, stripping before the camera to help the cause.” Ha. Jack worked in a quip.

“I knew we could count on him to go to that level for the accolades!”

The Marsh Arab Village

Zemya, the man named for a snake, phoned the man named for a rifle.

“Rifle, a strafing run is coming on you. A-10s, bearing South.” Indeed. An MK 82 bomb case, affixed with a GPS receiver for modification into a JDAM precision guided munitions, spiraled headfirst groundward. Digits in a matrix determined the corrections in the bomb’s trajectory, digits mapped and transmitted from three points in a complex constellation coasting in motion 17,000 miles per hour in an ellipse parked around 20,000 km up, between the extreme low orbit of sixty miles above the planet surface, and the lagrange point.

The amount of logical paths taken for the bomb to decide where to go were plenty. It had to decide where it was, where the target was, where the satellites were, what direction the bomb itself was moving, and what direction to correct toward. It further broke down to what direction to move the stabilizers. If one grid short of target, increase lift. Boolean logic is crude and simple, but manages to create seemingly complex behavior. If fleet dead, exit hyperspace. Many popular space navy video games operate under a series of

such simple scripts, creating behaviors that seem credible to the player. It thus becomes possible for a single programmer to program exciting space missions in as little as an hour.

Consequently, programmers worldwide, eager to create as fine a product in as little time as possible, exploit the model in all sorts of projects, including defense projects.

This is why weasels poach on military networks so easily.

Most troublemakers labeled hackers by the public, and as crackers by those that know a hash bucket from a handsaw, are known as script kiddies, malicious dorks that take scripts written somewhere, and apply them against systems with vulnerabilities posted on message board ad infinitum, and the sophomoric time-budgeted security methods taken to fend them off won't stop a stealth hack.

Out in the ether space, a solitary Russian named Vladimir understood well the vulnerabilities of these systems, seeing that he'd exploited this massive world-wide weakness repeatedly. Though physically located on the Georgia-Russian border on a ski lift, his mind climbed in astral projection through a GPS uplink, which tapped on the ports of a satellite far away. Because it had to accept the questions of a user on the ground, it had to accept certain information packets through the firewall. Otherwise, it couldn't service the public. Vladimir's port scanner knew as much.

Plekanov, a contributor to his native country's own GLONASS (Global'naya Navigatsionnaya Sputnikovaya Sistema) constellation, knew in advance the packets to sneak through. His method closely resembled the approach of the Mr. Jay Gridley in San Jose, California, which, comically enough, had the enemy's C compiler build up his hack for him. Only, it didn't build up a new program, only a mutation.

GPS finds locations through Multilateration, a process that unfolds through the knowledge of time difference of arrival. Simply by switching one digit, the signals didn't match up, and got the location wrong.

"Rifle, the bomb hit a garden plot, so I'm guessing the wheelman came through, that wizard!" The snake didn't witness the anguish inside the cockpits, only that the winged couple, and their big rotary guns, kept coming. The Rifle heard their rattling jets through the window of his cinderblock house.

"Spread flat on the walls!" He shouted, flattening his back hard in example. He tensed, but kept his eyes wide when the strafing began. Depleted uranium, with three times the atomic weight of steel, formed milk carton-sized projectiles, sharp at that, slicing through the roof at mach three, at a rate of 3,000 a minute, sustained for a full second, in a pair of waves. Concrete dust pelted them over every exposed surface, obstructing vision.

Ruzhyo, fully realizing the strafing run had passed, pointed and shouted, "flatten against the adjacent set of walls!" He trained his ears for the jet noise. Yep, they were banking to cross the T' with their next strafing attack. Steel rain stitched through again, just as horrifying as before. Horrifying, but utterly ineffective.

Nearby

The NMEA data protocol report sent by the GPS satellite had been doctored. He sure didn't mess up, Molina insisted, and the Air National Guardsman up there protested he didn't screw it, and the tech weenies pleaded that the bugs in their program had plenty of time to be worked out. He knew where he was, and the laser range-finder knew where the house was, and things hadn't moved quick enough for a careless mistake. What are

these people we're fighting?

They found and flooded across the connecting tunnel, and he'd blasted through with some sort of super shotgun, and a corrosive gas. A leftover from Saddam's reign? These villagers knew teargas, and insisted it wasn't any they knew.

The enemy had two buildings already. The Sheik directed his militia to push concrete barriers into the streets. It cut down slightly on the mobility of the APC, but Robin Molina understood his friends' desire to slow the advance with barriers. It pushed back their mobile firepower, though.

He checked his leg. Still fastened on tightly. Then he moved closer to the firefight. Russian-model chain guns duelled with Russian-model chain guns and RPK types. It matched the ferocity of a Vietnam-era meeting engagement, but, worse; neither side would disengage. And both have full frontal enfilades.

The A-10s called bingo fuel, they were at the point of no return and a smidge beyond, and those... Iranian air strikes had the tankers grounded. Tomcats, those went home. British Harriers were ETA under five minutes. Good news came in that the enemy APCs had pulled back somewhere, but Molina knew not where. FUBAR.

Ruzhyo's House

Everyone looked shipshape. Ruzhyo ordered a quartet to follow him out back, after delegating authority over the house to Strelok. "Guard the periphery," had been his standing orders. He had a designated marksman take the attic, watching beyond the back courtyard. Over the courtyard brick wall was a ghetto of traditional Ma'dan reed huts, presumably used as barns or something.

The guys fanned past the groves. Ruzhyo looked back at his marksman. Clear? The marksman squelched his radio once, an affirmative. Mikhail shouldered his An-94 to offer a foothold for his point man. Point inserted his boot into his cupped hands, accepting the boost. Mike felt the weight dissolve, then accepted another boot, until all cleared the obstruction.

He heard sporadic gunfire, with at least one upstart being a .303 Lee Enfield rifle. A ma'dan picket? Possibly, not all would have a Kalashnikov rifle. The attic marksman returned fire as the Chechen lifted his body over the wall. The dusty street offered no cover, but the four-man team effectively broke into a wide skirmish line, crouched, performing reconnaissance by fire, retaliating against the return fire, and leapfrogging ahead.

A narrow alley existed to port, so Ruzhyo trotted to reconnoiter it. He kept the iron sights near his focus of vision while shirking around the edge. An armed figure, aiming, stood in a firing position from the opposing alleyway. His muzzle emitted white flame, as did Ruzhyo's.

Cold hammers thudded his flat torso plate in a close trio, transferring joules of force into a painful byproduct, cracked ribs. He focused his center to stay put; doubling over into the alley would be death. He held to the concrete wall, and feebly managed to elevate the rifle. Pain slashed through the muscles connecting the chest to the shoulder, but he lifted enough to level a half-respectable shot. Watered, blurry eyes zeroed on two figures, one dragging the other into a doorway. Mikhail clenched his teeth tighter when summoning the crucial three foot-pounds for depressing the steel. Recoil from two 5.45mm bullets fired in a burst rate of 1700 RPM, blessedly, rated as less than torture.

Finally, he sagged and unclenched the two rows of teeth he'd mashed to avoid biting off his tongue or lip. Only breathing, and moving, and standing still hurt.

Across The Street

"I thought the tango grunts couldn't shoot," coughed Fraser Singe, Gurkha rifleman and veteran of East Timor. Contracted auxiliaries of the coalition had dealt with plenty of sharp-shooting insurgents, but most had been solitary figures or marksman/spotter teams working as ad hoc 'snipers,' a phenomenon of modern war and fact of militaristic life since the franc-tireur first began shooting Germans.

"Yeah, they're customarily area-effect aficionados in these parts, hombre. Spraying and praying is first-nature for many accustomed to al shahada. I've had to teach ours that faith and diligence keeps the rifle aim more true." Robin Molina examined the flat surface on the black torso plate of his comrade. "Hijole, that dude didn't space them much. Check it."

"If you'll give me breathing space," muttered Singe, protesting physically to Molina's pinning to the floor. "Jeez, man, I thought I made it clear we only had a platonic relationship." *Yikes. Evacuate immediately.* Apologetic back peddling is clumsy business for an amputee.

"Lo siento- uh, sorry!" Robin felt no different than if a fist full of peppers had furiously parted through his mouth. He held conviction his cheeks burned radish-like. Singe defused a chuckle trapped down deep.

"Yeah ha, I only felt one, that lucky buzzard!" Unnecessarily, Molina pointed.

"Those are small indentations in the trauma plate, Hermano, like five-point-four-five small." Without another word, Molina walked on. "An Abakan plinked you. Be

thankful you lived.”

Fraser Singe, now alone, peeled off his tri-colored desert camouflage jacket, and let his load-bearing burden plummet. The sensations of touch tumbled down from the shield his limbic system raised when the Abakan gunman double-tapped him. Swelling commenced over the sternum, but somewhere under that place where endorphins leaked from his glands, satisfaction consoled him. My three bigger rounds bagged that sucker.

The Marsh

Wheelman transmitted one last text message, giving The Snake one last location, heading, and speed update of the flight of F/A2 Sea Harriers coming in. Very good. Reeds impeded his vision of the sky, at least much of it, but the Russian commando swiveled his turret toward the heading, keeping his iron sights trained where he anticipated a black speck to fly. His aide de camp belatedly confirmed the text message, giddily announcing a strong blip on his passive bistatic set. The LORAN radio navigation towers blipped again, painting the four jets lightly with an electric brush their receivers didn't warn them about. Grigory grunted, itched to depress the triggers for his devastating 30mm auto cannon, a gun of dual-purpose mounted on his great Egyptian fighting vehicle. He stalked with others stuck in the marsh, concealed under matted reeds and alluvial muck.

He grinned nostalgically of shooting down more jets while in the concealment of a water platform. He'd done this kind of work before, including a couple of Tu-134s in the Black Sea in 1994, a jet carrying the two presidents of Rwanda and Burundi that same year, and an airliner on the American east coast in 1996. Yeah, he'd done this work for a long time, but now he has a wolf pack to make a big shoot-down. They'd be unable

to disavow his exploit, like they did that TWA flight. Intent on the sky, he couldn't afford to visually inspect the men. He took it on faith and sheer Russian machismo that his men had their weapons, ranging from HN-5 man-portable missiles to Type 56 and KPV 14.5mm machine guns, aimed skyward and focused when the Sea Harriers stopped being blips on a boring TV screen, and became threats to the livelihood of the ground-pounder.

He gleefully imagined their plight. These guys had been ramped off the flight deck as soon as word telephoned in about the Baghdad strike. They'd gone up in the air defense role, then coalition AWACS or JSTARS or whatever does that blasted thing tasked them to close air support of a village in dire need. So very sweet having these all-steel underpowered pidgins cruise over his trap. Wheelman couldn't have manipulated events better.

Grigory watched anxiously. He doubted the British planes had decent look-down capability, being an air-to-air naval bird, but as they closed, he felt the absurd sensation of a predatory light passing through his marrow. He contracted his carpal muscles.

"Fire!"

Sustained flashes jumped from his vehicle to the flight element lead, bashing the nose, folding it up into crumple and smoke as the others bolted away. All guns fired, chasing the unsuited quartet in the openness of the sky. They couldn't hide, they had no afterburners, and they had no titanium armor. They had merely ADEN cannons, 30mm nose guns only good for direct fire.

West Texas, July of 2004

“Those birds sounded as vulnerable as those ducks down there,” observed Jack Ryan, triggering his shotgun to punctuate the reality, “I recall all four failed to make the return to the Illustrious flight deck.” The duck took pellets across the breasts, and plummeted into the algae in a tidal thud.

“The ambush was as thorough as anything I’ve ever seen,” Roger Gordian opined. “We were certainly not dealing with some nascent indigenous force. At least, the Iraqi military of March 2003 couldn’t do something like that.”

The Village, April 2004

A radioman by trade, Sergeant/Communications (18E) Robin Molina, held his two pound wonder, the AN/PRC-148 Multiband radio, which he’d grown up with in the ranges between Kabul and Peshawar in 2001 and 2002, before winning a direct non-expense trip to Ramstein AFB. It worked well high in the mountains, so well he recalled no dead spots, and what worked well in Afghanistan two years ago only works better in flat deserts and even marshland.

He hunkered beside a rugged-topped table smothered in grains of nascent cinderblock dust, shaken from the bricks pummeled by fragmentation and shelling. The unsettled debris summoned some coughing, but Molina dutifully dispatched news of the Sea Harriers, the vehicles in the marsh, and the enemy’s infiltration.

Fraser the Gurkha assumed the window as his station, his torso area completely taped up, Robin saw, and his M8, still called the XM8 by the overly conservative Army, hanging on to a petite daylight camera/closed circuit TV acquired from the Land Warrior program. Molina watched him hang it from the window, and indirectly aim with the unproven closed circuit television.

“Field testing of yet another Land Warrior component is going smoothly,” he flip-pantly chimed into his field radio. “William Eaton, I need advised about those Anglo air-dales down in the marshy beyond.”

“Cut the poetics, British Knight, we reckon that region’s too hot for a helo evac,” said Rollie, referring to Molina by the nickname penned by Nigel, a play on his knowledge that Robin is a “BK,” a Below the Knee amputee. Thank Jesus and the saints Burger King didn’t stick, thought the Roswell native.

“Willy Echo, we are Army men, regardless of who our chopper pilot is, I don’t want chatter about any helos again, over.” Squelch.

“Roger. . . Burger King!” On radio, no one can hear you scowl.

“Those limeys are bullet sponges out there, Eaton, I want to pull our truck out and haul them in.” *Am I nuts?* “A few habib and I could go on a gun run and try to retrieve them.”

“But they aren’t yours to retrieve, Boobie King, the Royal Navy is already set for an evac.” Robin swore he heard a sigh. “Disregard that, the limeys are only dispatching fast-movers. I want a no BS assessment, can the village hold on without the a fortiori armored vehicle backing it up?” Molina watched as Singe triggered another unnatural looking shot, holding the rifle like a baby with a dripping diaper, while watching TV. Modern urban combat can be a strange sight to behold.

“We have the infiltrated unit pinned, except for one fire team trying to break out in the southeast. There, the enemy is holing up in some of the reed structures, and we’re prepared to kick them in the dirt, Sir!” A chortle served as reply.

“That’s settled. Go be agile, mobile, and hostile.”

“Hooah!” He slipped the brick into his webbing; a left pouch on his LC-2 harness, patted it down for assurance, and cantered toward the Gurkha, who still cornered the big bad plastic army gun with the video camera around the window. One stern pat on the back pulled Singe and his phaser/tricorder doohickey from the firing position. The Nepalese professional soldier fingered at a fresh translucent magazine in his webbing as his face turned toward his superior officer. His orders bellowed over the sporadic reports from diesel engines and field crew firepower.

“Singe, I’m leading an armored extraction of some downed airmen. That means you have command in the village. Take this radio,” he removed the AN/PRC-148 “brick,” and planted it in the hand Singe just freed from feeding a new magazine, “and try to let Camp William Eaton know what’s the ground situation!” A flaming quartet of big anti-aircraft shells blazed through the window, pounding more dust from a back wall.

“Sir, I’m not familiar with the radio, Sir.” Robin assured him the SF soldier had it tuned to the right frequency.

“Just turn it on like so,” he demonstrated. “William Eaton, I’m transferring command to Singe, over.”

“Roger that, Burger King.”

Only a minute later

Molina ducked and weaved through enough back alleys and concrete barriers to reach the APC, taking appreciation once again that the most literal translation of the vehicle’s name, a fortiori, was “from the stronger.” The name, selected by Roger Gordian, was meant in the context the phrase is utilized in logic for, the transition from a weaker answer to a more solid one, and indeed, this armor stopped all.

“Status?” Molina puffed as he halted before the Ma’dan crew. The sheik, weary but smiling, waved lightly at his younger American friend.

“My friend, we have new boxes of the ammunition up, and petrol in the tanks, but the mortar shells gone from the fighting from the last day and the night and to this very morning are lost to us. Behold, we have few but some rations, besides Willy Pete for smoke. I fear we’re almost out, Lad.” The sheik frowned in apology, shifted uncomfortably. The younger men, some bent and scarred from years of battling Saddam in the receding marshes, aged and worn by the years of Saddam’s environment-destroying terror, still smiled upon finishing the load out. Robin grinned back, and pulled himself through the back hatch.

“Men, we have a serious problem. Some of the aviators fighting off the enemy outside this community have augured into the ground, and with your permission, Mr. Sheik, I’d like to take some of your finest with me, and rescue them from slaughter.” The sheik looked touched that this foreign soldier, this man Iraqis would call a son of a dog, asked the cultural and tribal leader, rather than assume rank in pulling from the city defense.

“You can have them. Go be a hero.” They mutually bid farewell, and the Hispanic American slapped the roof, signaling the driver to move. Gravel and dust kicked up, obscuring the Sheik greatly as he waved in an extended farewell. Molina returned the send-off, before closing the back hatch.

“Roll call!”

The Ma’Dan, set stiffly on benches in the warm steel hulk, spoke in synchronisation, labelling themselves by the nicknames they’d long answered to in their village, or in the Iranian shanties they’d fled to a few years ago. The names were Arabic, brief, and Molina thought boyish. These young men, boys, held a strong sense of community,

having all grown up playing together, and in the worst times, starving together and fighting together against the Republican Guard units. Like the American frontier, as he'd read about it, these 'boys' actually varied greatly in age. Some featured full beards, and possibly had children of their own, but these younger boys were their peers. They'd trawled the marshes together, built the city defense, built the city itself. Robin Molina looked at them all, and imagined the sort of life they lived. Agrarian, polygamous households, with well water, and food only came earned from the ground, in the water, or through hunting.

The concept of a diet, a picky selection in nutrition, wasn't known firsthand to them. Vegetarianism would mean willingly starving on the days a slain water buffalo was the only meal. School must have been a mix of schoolroom religious instruction with an air of Greek instruction. Robin had personally seen the old sheik take the boys out into the open, and talk to them about classical ethics, and their relation to Islam. It had surprised him greatly that these Ma'Dan practiced Sufism, and when the time came to deliver secret instruction to his initiated, he bashfully asked the American Catholic to stay away. He'd apologized afterward, but had asked favor.

"This is my testimony of the love of Allah," he'd said reverently, firmly planting a sheaf of papers, loosely bound in leather and reed, into his hands. "The poetic works of my lifetime are in there, as well as my account of the last thirty years fighting that serpent of Satan, Saddam." He had then imparted to the soldier a timeless Sufi proverb:

"There are three ways of knowing a thing. Take for instance a flame. One can be told of the flame, one can see the flame with his own eyes, and finally one can reach out and be burned by it. In this way, we Sufis seek to be burned by God." ¹ He insisted he'd

¹The original Sufi author is unknown

lived so long because it had been his mission- a soldier can relate to that, mission- to pass his instruction into the West, into the East, and into any home with loving people that would listen.

A month later, the book was selling on Amazon, and some larger publishers were negotiating to distribute it further. As God willed it, the man proclaimed.

In the present, his militiamen opened the small rifle ports on the hull of the vehicle, and triggered excitedly at vehicles being pulled by electric winches from the slough.

“Mashallah! Mashallah! Mashallah!” Molina understood their exclamation meant “What God wills!” They’d done that a minute before, when they’d streaked past the infiltrating fire team residing on one of the ‘mudhifs’, reed homes, and this time, it didn’t spook him. The eldest one grabbed hold of what Molina considered the Israeli variant of the Common Remotely Operated Weapons System (CROWS), the joystick and monitor control for the outboard ‘quad-fifty,’ the four linked machineguns up top, while Robin dunked one WP smoke round into the mortar after another.

The smoke screen would enshroud their escape. Inshallah, as the sheik would assure him. With complete conviction, inshallah.

The End

Stay tuned for the epilogue

23.0.1 Epilogue

No one pinpointed exactly when the draw down began, or exactly what factor discouraged them, but as time passed, and it did at an agonizing pace, money, the liquid medium of value, stopped moving into militant causes. The financiers, whoever they may have been, simply no longer saw value in the things their terror-wielding proxies believed in. Without sponsors, the erstwhile proxies gradually withered on the date trees, lacking the funds to keep apace in the arms race.

In June 2004, Roger Gordian sensed it, felt the will of his rival serving as the enemy's financier fade. He leafed through Xeroxed photos of the still smoldering war machine a shadowy man in Chechnya had washed away a fortune for. Fifty-year-old steel tombs of T-55 tanks, the last Stalin-era main battle tank, finally stopped smoking some time in May of that year, unwrapping the shroud that had covered the extent of the upgrades the chassis had gone over. Plenty, it turned. Plenty of fortune. Plenty thrown away to crush one facility. Roger felt the foreignness of the Soviet-style armored cavalry charge, and open-desert rush into combat that really wasn't foreign at all. He'd read of American tanks charging through the desert to disastrous effect in 1943 on the Saharan fields, taking a beating from anti-tank guns of the Afrika Korps. He also remembered the more recent 1991 VII Corps sweep into Southern Iraq that ended much better. How do they do that? How do you drive ahead, not clad in protective terrain, and have faith a hail of missiles won't collide with you?

That sensationalist reporter, that Geraldo fellow, had a rough cut of his documentary finished, streaming online after airing in an abbreviated fashion on television. *I have hair growing from my nose*, Roger lamented, seeing a still image of his own face on the television. Several white hairs. Ashley would have picked them out, mashing her

fingernails around each follicle and yanking, if no better tools resided in the folds of the cavernous purse she had strapped by her side.

But she remained safe- safer- in the lower forty-eight states, far removed from this new death den that takes the worst from Columbia, Somalia, the West Bank/Southern Lebanon, and Northern Ireland into one California-sized state. The kidnappings were the same as Lebanon and Columbia, and a measure worse in their presentation. Columbia's FARC didn't need filmed executions, they just needed the immediate families, grieving banks, to provide funds. Here it worked differently. The captives were drama as often as investments.

There was no way Roger Gordian would die passively. Here, in Baghdad, The Bureau of Diplomatic Security (DS) crowded him as he shuttled through the shut-in buildings of the loose fortress on the Tigris, the Green Zone. They were just some green kids on Temporary Duty (TDY), but he could trust them with not letting him fall to a kidnapping squad.

Two held close to him, sitting on a flan sofa of considerable age and wear. No eyes, just Rayban aviator glasses watched nothing in his room. Their pinstripe suits gave the illusion of starvation in the thin agents, a subtle way to hide the soft vest armor under the jackets.

The remainder of their kits were largely Swiss, SIG-Sauer P228 pistols holstered, and Rolexes that appeared to be authentic makes. They were both Caucasian men, lean, and of slightly taller than average height. The better to absorb incoming bullets. One had freckles, while the other bore the scars of acne. Both looked like they'd continued efforts to bulk up, but have avoided the temptation to try performance enhancing substances.

"I have hair coming from my nose, dun I?"

The two jointly peeked at one another, and again faced their ‘principal,’ the guy they took a duty to protect, reminiscent of the agents from that Wachowski Brothers movie that took so much from William Gibson.

“The Matrix.”

“What?”

“You think we come straight out of The Matrix.”

“Yeah,” Gordian agreed. “Is there hair in my nose now?”

Shades glued hypnotically at him, presumably dutifully at his nostrils, but Roger’s mind ventured away, toward the Caucasus Mountains. Presumably, that man responsible for shouldering the insurgency walked and breathed there, if Jay Gridley’s tracing of the proxy routing had been accurate. Surely. Probably. Maybe. The police work in Maryland, and their conclusions, meshed too perfectly with the geek work. Going after him, into ‘the Stans,’ fell on the duty of men like those facing Roger at that moment, the DS boys. They were the guys for it, a fact that would deeply surprise the folks back home, folks that believed everything hinged on the secretive fellows at the CIA. No, assuming these governments would apply a faade of cooperation, diplomatic security would have an active hand in apprehending those that threatened American citizens with terror.

Colin Powell still had troops, even as he wore his diplomat hat.

These regions lie far away, in lands locked from the open seas, and reaching them would take help. Roger may have been staring at America’s, and by extension the West’s, primary soldiers in the nation’s most isolated war front since the Northern Russia Campaign against the Bolsheviks from 1918-1920.

If Turkey doesn’t cooperate, even the most extreme Special Operations Forces plans

may by necessity have to give way to covert wet works through the CIA and the DS, for logistical reasons. The future of the Stans are shaded in monochrome, a tone the Russian Hegemony has grown accustomed to for many centuries.

That fight will come sometime later. For now, may the marshes prosper, safe from evil and misery.

Ah, the Russian merchant of death, or Chechen, or whoever he is, he will now have to live a restless lifestyle of safe house hopping, like the Saudi rich kid, like the Jordanian butcher, and like others who've already hopped their last time, like countless Hamas leaders, some Libyans, the original PLO-aligned Black September gang, Khalid Sheik Mohammed, Ramzi Yusef, Adolf Eichmann, Hermann Goering, Slobodan Milosevic, Uday and Kusay Hussein, as well as their father, and Uday's 14-year-old son, who died aiming a Kalashnikov at a soldier. Since 1945, and certainly since the end of the Cold War, justice, or karma, or whatever mechanism that weights disincentives on being a murderous pig, is expanding. They no longer get to die peacefully in the privacy of their Fuhrerbunkers the way they did from 1945 to Mao's quiet end.

May Pol Pot be the last one to pass gently from this world. Ayman al-Zawahiri or Abu Musab al-Zarqawi will no doubt bolt wide awake one night wondering why their flesh is on fire, and what the heck happened to their eardrums and nasal cavities.

There are two ways to go, Pilgrim, you can surrender peacefully like Pinochet, or like Pablo Escobar. Your world is bleak and binary now, not ours.

Roger un paused the rough cut of the documentary, and reviewed the events. Gerardo Gutierrez had a nice groupware system on his personal website that allowed any registered user in the world to edit his stock footage and present a more-or-less customized video on a personal diary, or pass on for further revision on an open groupware

page, but Roger wanted to put his own remarks on the film before the big theatrical release. Sadly, pathetically, he felt with full gravity, he needed heavy airbrushing. He was, normatively, factually, unavoidably, a blemished old man.

Vanity aside, the movie grabbed him. No documentary could match the visuals of actually being on the receiving end of an artillery barrage, or had access to hours of multi-angle digital security footage of a massive firefight, until Roger's Sword unit released it all to the journalist, to supplement his camera crew. The terabytes of audio and video, hosted in a loss-less digital format, has spawned thousands of, Roger could hardly believe, music videos and montages that became voted up to the front page, e-mailed and instant messaged, and embedded in a hundred thousand pages across the net. As Roger watched the limited-release DVD, Gutierrez's lawyers negotiated an affiliation program with a loop-based music editing company for music scoring event, which an open-source music editor had already opted in.

Very well, he thought, in this rough cut, the music sounded like stock recordings taken from the racist classic, *The Birth of a Nation*, just muted down a little. Hopefully, the emergence of a thousand amateur sound editors and musicians will elevate the project further, beyond the tired method of scoring Wagner's *Flight of the Valkyries* in the big rescue scene. The world has moved beyond DW Griffith, and everyone involved wants to reflect that. Good luck with that.

On his desk lay a laptop, with an unfamiliar word processor document open. Abi-Word, what in the sands of Arabia is that? Whatever the enigma, the rookie geek, Gridley, forwarded a memorandum that made computers harder for everyone in the company proper, UpLink, and the Sword team throughout the world. Microsoft boiled garnet and ornery over it, and the electronic troops didn't much like the transition,

either. Reportedly, they even missed an episode of Dragon Ball Z when taking the time to figure the workings of the new software. That provoked grumpiness.

The blasted program felt unfamiliar, how it scrolled in a radical fashion from, uh, Word or whatever it was, but he figured out how to write and save a note with it. Mr. Gutierrez, Mr. Scull, Ms. Breen, he headed his letter, I look like a pitiful old man. I'd be appreciative if I could look more presentable to the viewers of these films. I am a public figure, after all, and the managerial head of a great number of people. Would the lot of you kindly consider airbrushing the worst out of my skin?

What's the use? The guys wanted grit, and grit is an ugly and damaged thing, something an audience will see as tanned and battered. The more hardboiled he looks, the more he fits in with the tone of the program. Bloody it all. He revised the request, liberally tapping away at the backspace, and filling in a more reasonable critique. It didn't match how he felt, but it better matched what a leader ought to write.

He mailed it. At least the mail program worked simply. Whatever the end product evolved into, it came with his consent. He liked how it threaded together. Approved.

"What's the time?" He stretched, felt his old shoulder blades pop in the middle of his back. Oh, there's the time on the laptop. An agent shared the time, just as a scheduled message warned him of a deadline. The brief was a short time away. Scuttlebutt had it the handover from the Coalition Provisional Authority would come tonight. Paul Bremer would then silently board a plane, and disappear. Before then, Roger needed to appear there for a brief on the progress of the marshes.

Mikhail Ruzhyo also tapped into the local scuttlebutt.

The boss thankfully kept a tentacle in the Baghdad electrical streams, piggybacking

on the satellite uplink responsible for switching State Department emails from the land of two rivers to Foggy Bottom. Wheelman thinks the handover comes tonight, in order to avoid planned attacks set for the scheduled handover on the thirtieth. Well, imagine how it looks when the civilian leadership retreats under fire. That's precisely what Plenkanov dispatched Ruzhyo for that night, moving the Chechen to a well-disguised drop point, a burnt orange flower pot under a sienna balcony in Sadr City, where an old yet capable S-4M derringer type pistol with 7.62x63 silent ammunition, and a Browning Buckmark .22 Silhouette target pistol, loaded with some quality match ammunition. Both rested wrapped in a bubble wrapped manila envelop, which he tore apart rapidly.

Both pistols concealed easily enough for a town where mortar crews and Capone-style death squads routinely passed through the streets, picking up collaborators or lobbing shells near the police or the bubble, but he anticipated trouble would come getting into the convention center. Getting through that would depend on Vladimir's little doodads, some more arcane high tech for the warrior to apply to the anti-art of rapid deconstruction. His aptitude outmatched any he knew, and he'd personally frozen the animation from more people than anyone save Paul W. Tibbets Jr. and a few others, and accepted that as his natural role. Moving to the field he felt most organically fitted for merely positioned him into a function occupied by many other natural forces, as common and routine as the Karachi mosque explosion that killed twenty early that June, or the five aid workers killed in old Northern Alliance Afghan country. Sometimes they don't die right away; somehow the British averted the June 3rd airline deaths Vladimir had planned when killing the air traffic control computers, but they'll all eventually meet a conclusion, whether it happens young and violent, like the five ambushed here in Sadr City, or after a long life and silent, that the enduring giant Ruzhyo remembered on state

TV long ago, Reagan. That seemed impossible, but it happened, without any help from an RG-14 revolver. It didn't matter that he did what *Clostridium difficile* did to ninety Canadians that month. Death was hard coded omni directionally into the world, he simply did it mercifully and quickly, and to those most suited to push the eventuality further into the future than most. He simply leveled out the inequality in the timeline of what people call the great equalizer. By leveling another rate, he served the same function as a progressive tax scale. For the death rate.

He had become another utility, another collector in the waste management business, like a militant janitor.

This janitor had barriers to cross, like T-Walls, the finest barriers now in existence, topped with razor wire coils. These bleach white concrete slabs can absorb any missile, any car bomb, and demolition kit, at least once. An exaggeration, maybe, but they're working, and they're expanding from the original few blocks that made up The Bubble (Green Zone) to the police stations, barracks, and even the shops and homes of Baghdad. A maze of them had nearly trapped him in a Marsh Arab village a couple months back, and if he hadn't crawled through a sewage canal. . .

They'd been routed, just. Acceptable, given the target was secondary on Vladimir's agenda. From that wizard's mind, acceptable. Not everyone in the team used their craft well. Gospel and Scimitar died clearing a house, bullets striking them from through the reed walls, after they entered. Regrettable. Those two belonged on the team.

Ruzhyo's legs began to tremor as he walked in line at the bus stop. Humanity of all demographics clumped together, chattering nervously together, overlapping a swell of observations about the heat, the fuel lines, the power breaks, and those completely evil foreign fighters, those likely to attack buses.

“And those sons of dogs (Americans) recline behind their tanks and planes while we get decimated, and melt under the heat,” groused a mother, fanning her partially exposed face with a stack of colorful dinars. She angrily gripped the lithe bronze arm of her little boy, a kid that looked Lebanese to the Chechen behind her. “We aren’t dumb, we know if the power failed in America for five hours, those Army Engineers would truck through a warpath of raging Indians to flip the switches back.”

Some males assented, and riffed on some more problems. The petrol lines, of course. No matter how many bullets Jay Z or Ice Cube put through a town, a do-ragged boy pointed out, some fat white guy would park a tanker truck at the petrol pump the next day. Americans don’t need to ration, they get shipped all the oil.

“I lost my husband to a Marine checkpoint, and I had to berate the provisional office every day for a month before I got my check!”

As Ruzhyo finally found a seat, he overheard the same woman mutter “George Bush doesn’t care about Arabs.” The driver introduced himself as Afmad, and urged everyone to sit down, before he flipped on his CD player.

“Late at night in summer heat, expensive car... empty street...” the driver sang in perfect English to Sting and rapper Twista, a favorite song. The boy that admired Jay Z exclaimed approval, rapt.

“Hey, Twista! That’s one straight up thug!”

“So here I am in a stolen car...”

Mikhail Ruzhyo almost lost himself in new Arab communal tradition of admiring American gansta rap culture about ‘a poor boy... in a rich man’s car.’ It somehow felt normal to the cosmopolitan assassin, who had seen an untold statistic of such oddities.

The big Greyhound finally sputtered and screeched on the breaks at the bus stop,

walking distance from Al Jumhuriya Bridge. Some filed out, but Ruzhyo and some of the older individuals remained for the cruise across the bridge to Yafa Street, where the Chechen caught his first glimpse of the big pine guard tower with the machine gunner at attention. An M1A2 main battle tank kept its 125mm smooth bore gun on the flank of the bus, in case it started to race at the checkpoint.

Online

‘In the dead of night he’d access each depositor’s account
And from each of them he’d siphon off the teeniest amount.
And since no one ever noticed that there’d even been a crime
He stole forty million dollars a penny at a time!’
–John Foster, in *The Ballad of Silicon Slim*

Vladimir Plekhanov tiredly watched XML documents update a scant duration from his last peek. Newswires dynamically morphed into fresh intelligence, and it pleased him. YUKOS, the largest Russian oil company, wonders where its money went, while Putin is preparing to arrest Mikhail Borisovich Khodorkovsky. That will prevent them from sending the authorities after Plekhanov for skimming profits out of fractions for all these years.

*‘Now, I never considered myself a thief
GM wouldn’t miss just one little piece
Especially if I strung it out over several years.’*

He sang along with Johnny Cash in the only song he knew of about salami slicing, the slow theft of fractions from various accounts over years to earn a massive aggregate

in the end. Vladimir had taken from YUKOS and YUKOS stockholders, employees, and pension plans every time they moved from one tax shelter to another, every time they made a purchase, and every time they actually paid taxes, property, withholding, income, corporate. Eleven years, and they haven't discovered it, just as the space agency didn't notice, and the Red Army pension office. Half a kopek from every Russian employee that once worked under the Soviet Union.

Under the circuited visor he wore in the sensory-deprivation chamber he floated in, 'The Chechen Idoru,' as the American-led coalition called him, grinned at how he hid his mischief. If you want to hide your out misdeeds, imprisoning those pursuing you works best. He mentally categorized the YUKOUS tax evasion case as an insurance policy that pushed back discovery of his skimming another three to five years. The beauty of it, lost on anyone not in Vladimir's head, is that now that Russian tax auditors are looking over YUKOUS records, the oil company's accountants will actually unwittingly assist the thief, with all their ingenuity, in obfuscating the accounting records. A perfect crime.

Another newswire document blinked to life. Another attack in the Green Zone. That's the one. Other developments also transmitted down the newswire. Mikhail had rampaged.

Outside the Convention Center

Thomas Ricci and Peter Nimec both wore black UpLink tees and jeans when they entered the ruby Chevy Suburban with their boss. Both kept FN P90 Tupperware submachine guns (or personal defense weapons, if one prefers) strapped tightly on their chests, much the same way British paras packed on Sten guns when dropping on the

Nazis.

After saying hello, Nigel Braun, driving, lamented the ballistic properties of their bullets.

“I’ll take them over the weak-arsed pistol shots of the MP5, but I don’t like the 5.7 x 28 mm. Give me a Colt Commando, and I’d be comfortable on this ride.”

Deep breath, Rog, just settle down.

“We’ve been through this, Nij, our forces agreed to field test different weapons that haven’t yet been... blooded... in actual combat, in order to win a small contract. This arrangement is helping us pay our way here, and avoid buying extra weapons and ammo for continued operations-”

“You make a great logistics officer, Sir,” interrupted Nimec, grinning. Ricci mirrored him. “We appreciate the arrangement, but I have my own concerns about the weapon. I like the SS190 round, or in my case, the SS191 tracer round,” mischievous grin, “but I’m worried about the tritium night sight.” Ricci scoffed at him.

“He’s afraid some enlightened soul will shine a police spotlight at us, washing out the value of the sight. But,” he held out his hand to preempt cross-talk, “our ancient human eyes will also be blinded in that event.” Nimec fumed.

“Excuse me, but we’ve had an enemy outthinking us since we got here and-”

“We beat them.”

“But-”

“We beat them,” repeated Ricci, “and we’ll beat them again. I for one enjoy the luxury of having small defense weapons like the P90 and the Five-SeveN that can pierce the soft armor some of the hadjis are strapping on now.”

From the side of his mouth, Nimec muttered “you got your data from the Brady

Bunch,” alluding to the Brady Campaign against ‘cop-killer’ bullets.

“Did not!”

“And voted for Clinton.”

“No way!”

“Perot.”

Complete silence.

“Really?” The whole car ballooned with laughter.

In a few minutes, Nigel handed his ID over at a checkpoint.

“Y’all have a nice evening,” said the Sergeant at the sandbag ring. “You too, Sergeant Howard,” replied the South African driver, reading the man’s label in the dim evening. He then drove on, as per Howard’s instructions, while a few enlisted men handled mirrors to check the chassis for munitions. They seemed nonchalant, as did the German Shepard on a leash.

A minute later, Braun had the Chevy parked beside some white sedans, and the party signed into the conference. Pete wished Roger luck, while Ricci scowled at the DS agents that confiscated their P90s. *I’m just glad we retained the Five SeveNs*, Nimec sighed, as he resumed scanning the crowd. He spotted former Mukhabarat assassin Iyad Allawi, a citizen of both Iraq and the United Kingdom, and current Interim Prime Minister. Amazing they let assassins become heads of state over here. Well, at least he could handle the insurgents. Then again, if Nimec understood his role correctly, he was merely the emergency surgeon for hit teams. Whatever.

Braun shuffled over, partaking from a kabob tray offered him by a Turk caterer. Nimec gently refused one, and diligently spied his boss pass through a sea of 42-inch waists to the podium, where he planned to go through his scheduled Power Point slide

show, augmented by Geraldo Gutierrez's video presentation.

"Hey there, Mate, are you drifting to sleep?" Pete confirmed the South African's query by resting his head on a banquet table.

"I've seen this play rehearsed enough. Heck, I was part of the historical event that inspired it." Braun took the succeeding yawn to mean "go away," so he stalked the kabob man.

Thomas Ricci more anxiously watched the aptly-labeled brief, fidgeting as he paced back and forth from the entrance, where some parade-uniformed US embassy guard Marines inexplicably arrived at the posts some DS security men were leaving. The arrangement must have something to do with the handover ceremonies, but the Marines, in his mind, only served to remind him of his comrade being held in detention. Paul Evens had returned to America bound by chains after the four months he served here. Roger promised a rescue, but such a thing would require a spade full of that nuance thing that's fallen into the public culture lately. Nuance, the attitude that simple actions must be treated with a superfluous amount of lingual attention. Like literary criticism. Alchemy can be done by simply pouring chemicals together. There's no need for all the colorful enigmatic doodles that go with it.

Now they're handing over a country with a moderate amount of fanfare, but to the Italian-American, even this much seemed unnecessary, until an elected government grasped the helm. *They're serving kabobs! CNN and FOX are here, doubtlessly beaming live feeds!* Tom glared for the Al Jazeera camera, giving them his finest movie gangster pose. *What's a good gangster sign?* Maintaining his stony expression, Ricci gestured "I love you" in American Sign Language. *There, Al Jazeera, I'm bad.*

His antics passed enough time that by the time boredom set in, Rog and the two DS

pukes exited the podium, to the pool of hand-shakers. Ricci ‘watched for Sirhan,’ as he always put it, having already seen some Mukhabarat members in the room. . . and plenty that fit the profile of young Arab males. Yeah, but are any of the hadjis Mr. Sirhan?

Roger chatted with Bremer as they meshed with Riccis detail. “An hour from your flight, how does it feel to finally turn away the journalists, Jerry?” Applause for Allawi drowned out the response, but his reaction seemed positive. No people on the planet make more noise when happy than Arabs, so Ricci flashed his gangster sign again.

“I’m already engaged,” quipped Peter Nimec, humoring the procession. An exceptionally tall Marine, SSG Dicob of the embassy service, guarded one white gloved hand over the hilt of his Mameluke Sword while Bremer ducked toward the open sedan door.

Across The Street

Wire mesh circumscribing it, the weapons still functioned lethally, even with an electric current coursing through it. The derringer didn’t bark, because the pistons in the silent ammunition absorbed the acoustic energy, and neither Army reservist saw the Chechen aim from two meters away. From the hip, hand hardly burrowed in his pocket, Mikhail triggered both barrels of his KGB pistol, the S-4M, point-shooting with his index finger aim, at the femoral arteries of the guards. The hot and sticky liquid drenched him, clinging his pants to his skin. At 36 degrees Celsius, it felt mildly hot in the cool evening air, but would soon cool in the chill.

He caught both bodies, resting them gently, while feeling the Browning Buckmark .22 press where he taped it. He reached, pulling it clear, wrapping his hands around the wire mesh Vladimir put on it. Degaussing a gun to pass through a metal detector sounded like voodoo, but he made it, and isolated before the door opposite from the

departing diplomat, felt ready for plinking.

Online

The thought felt pleasing, like watching your tormentor's house blaze. The dispatch had little, so he spied an open video feed from the Palestinian Hotel. Turner's old network, and Rupert's, and the newer Microsoft/NBC collaboration, trained cameras and sound booms at the ceremony. Bodies spread behind a Cadillac seeped out claret syrup from cranium drillings. Young and white, in stripe charcoal suits, the Russian expat to Chechnya knew them as diplomatic security.

Ruzhyo, you made it, but where's Bremer? The tires kicked off broken rubber treads as the armored vehicle raced away, toward the north exit, while a Bradley fighting vehicle raced after, angling the little gun turret west. Thus ends a very good day.

Firstgov, the gateway of the Americans online, forwarded more news of more strikes. A major browser exploit let him play maestro worldwide, as he collected more email addresses from his coalition of crush sites. Teens got emails, asking for addresses of the person that held a secret crush, and the poor youngsters complied, giving the Russian a massive list of valid addresses to continue the list with. The web pages they visited dropped a packet of script through every browser that struck the 'IM (instant message) this list to your admirer!' Millions of British, Canadian, American, Russian, and Chinese teens, using America Online's Instant Messenger and Internet Explorer, moved the worm faster than any 'I love you' email virus ever contracted on the web.

Faster than herpes in an Atlanta suburb, it saturated the consoles kids linked together with, then opening a new window, and logging to a peer-to-peer network, where it took instructions to send eyeballs to a page made of pixel ads, where it registered as a unique

set of eyeballs, then accepted new directions from the P2P network. Around the world, millions of computers replicated the process, giving millions of unique hits to tens of affiliated pixel ad sites, before human users rebooted their machines. To them, they knew a browser window opened, and that the mouse and keyboard froze, but their protection software didn't register a new virus.

Vladimir monitored his accounts in real time as digit stacked onto another digit. They collected in the savings accounts of those listed in obituaries in United States newspapers, those that have recently passed on, and wouldn't mind identity theft. They all had valid social security numbers and birth certificates, which courthouses held on to in their cabinets.

Eventually, the Department of Defense would uncover the embarrassment of learning their own fallen made up hundreds of the exploited dead. In death, they served the enemy, a grave dishonor. It pleased the hacker the way the widow of a soldier would please Genghis Khan. He laughed when the calculator added a quarter billion in nascent assets.

Ruzhyo

He triggered the tool machine-stamped from aircraft aluminum, an Olympic-grade piece for an Olympic-grade 'wet works' agent. The small red-dot scope superimposed over a DS agent's eyebrow when the firearm lightly recoiled from the subsonic .22 LR rimfire round, a heavy slow bullet. A high velocity round trailed its wake, allowing Ruzhyo to hit two targets simultaneously with a time-on-target attack... from a pistol. Two DS agents collapsed as he triggered at the bowing cranium of an agent pushing the diplomat firmly in the car.

Behind, Grigory, the Russian that entered the Green Zone with only a ceramic knife,

extracted his blade from a casualty's jugular, and groped the M9 Berettas from the slain men's holsters.

The sedan doors shut, and the driver smothered the pedal when The Snake aimed his 9mm Italian guns, raking the back tire. Ruzyho coarsely ordered him to stop while still firing light ammunition.

"Snake, get the sentry gun!" From the Russian's pocket came a pulsing laser pin, one three times more powerful than any constant-beam laser pen. He trained it roofward, where hanging from an arm, a heavy robotic rifle aimed at their stoop. "Blind it!" It did. The pulse lanced over the inorganic retina, blinding the first rifled responder, while the former Soviet Union's finest pistol shooter plinked side armed diplomatic soldiers. The marine with the saber retaliated from a prone position, triggering successive shots, low but correcting. They barked higher and higher, but the Olympian bided the time to aim, piercing the marine's left firing hand, which shielded much of his face.

"Flash him!" Mikhail shouted, upon seeing a somewhat swarthy civilian contractor cradling a P90 at the door. The penlight beneath one Berretta flashed, raking in an arc like a Capone massacre, until the intense white spotlight washed out the night sight.

Submachine guns. He cursed. The half-rifle ammo in the little guns altered the odds. He double-tapped the white-haired civilian's back, which had curled up protectively, but had a pistol muzzle flashing from beneath the armpit. Sneaky fellow.

The light-skinned contractor kneeling by a thin rose bush double-tapped an FN Five-SevenN pistol, striking Grigory in the abdomen, a darkening event. Mikhail stuck his target pistol in his waistband after snap-shooting that man's torso armor, and fled southeast as parked cars exploded in a domino effect.

The woman agent, the one with small dabs of semtex, must have lit multiple fuses in

the parking lot. Good. A bottle cap worth on a fuel tank would do fine. Bang! A louder one lifted a vehicle, as Grigory laid down some cover fire with his 15 round magazine.

Mike spoke into his lapel radio. “Hero, lay down some CR gas.” The gas, still not labeled a chemical agent, burns as much as ten times worse than the regular CS tear gas, as demonstrated by the pro-apartheid South Africans in the ’80s.

“Roger,” he said, hidden in the foliage, before the ’pop’ of a CO2 propellant sent an oversized grenade leaching a heavy vapor over Ruzhyo’s escape path. The Chechen deftly sacked his head in a sealing plastic as it poured over, and aimed one pistol round at the sentry gun he walked under.

“And for my next trick. . .” The former Spetnez agent unbuttoned his shirt, inverting it to display the three color desert pattern of the US Army, and ‘pursued’ an imaginary enemy to the riverbank, with his Army-issued M9 pistol aimed downward with both hands. The heavy machine gunner in the tower, restrained from firing.

An Executive Cabin, 41,000 Feet Over Harrisburg, Pennsylvania

The date is July 20th, 2004, thirty-five years after Apollo, and the war on Islamic terror networks has its center of gravity shifting westward into Lebanon, where Hezbollah is losing some early battles with the Cedar Revolution, a movement in favor of expelling Syrian forces, and more representation of the individual in government. A Texan would call that democracy.

Operation Web Tryp’s big sting goes off in hours, thereby ending one of the many online funding methods of the shadowy Russian or Chechen hacker/money man behind the mercenary upsurge in the Middle East. It won’t make waves, but Colin’s plan to boldly announce the killings by Janjaweed in Darfur as genocide. *Just wait until that*

fat filmmaker points out past American administrations supported Chadian Janjaweed against Libya in the 80s.

Relax. What Colin is doing will outweigh the fat man. Alone in his comfy recliner, the President of the United States indulged in a private laugh, while skimming the contents of a pardon Big Time drafted for him, after talking it up with Gordo when mallard hunting in the summer brush. The pardon looked plain enough, being for a marine responsible for many heroic actions in wars dating from the Persian Gulf to today, and throwing the molester of children into traffic. He seems like a nice guy, and if Big Time thinks he should be free, maybe there's something to it.

He shifted the legal paper on his desk, idly thinking it over. In Austin, he'd upheld the law firmly, as he promised to do swearing in four years ago, but... beneath the pardon, a yellow note lay dog eared. It contained the summary of a debriefing, with several signatures, including Jerry and that journalist named Geraldo. The claims seemed too good to be true, but they all came footnoted to more complete works, and referenced a contract.

This is a quid pro quo, thought he, remembering the favorite Latin phrase of career politicians. The pardon enclosed a provision that this marine must continue an extended service that contributes to catching that fiend residing in the Caucasus Mountain Range.

So be it. I'll be the decider, he indulged, taking the pen and carrying out his most routine business motion.

Appendices

.1 Deconstructing the Gordian Knot

Starting this journey was a lot of fun, any writer wired my way would know. I wrote the introduction into Roger Gordian's world much the same way as the Power Plays series began, in a mindset molded by mythology. It was still prose, but I wrote it for a certain amount of beauty. It tells the story of the second half of the XX century, from the viewpoint of a beatnik reporter, one could say. I should have kept notes about what I was thinking at the time, but I wasn't doing that just yet.

My 'bard's' viewpoint is that my nation's peak was around 1958, when the country was united in the space race, when for the first time, the American household averaged one car, when Ike was finishing his second term with the country at peace, and it looked like the Europeans would peacefully relinquish their empires.

"...When a wealth of families made good on saving enough capital to leave the urban traps they loathed so much, and uprooted into a more idyllic setting."

The suburban lifestyle was taking in everyone. In the suburbs, Joe Everyman reviewed his surroundings, and declared that they were good.

But America is a land of emigrants, or more accurately, refugees. Most, of course, were of European stock, people who prefer settling to a nomadic lifestyle. These people left their homes under the worst conditions, settled, choked on urban decay, moved from the Eastern shore to the West, and settled again. These people then moved further from their latest heritage, not just from a physical location, but from a lifestyle, to take residence on big plots of land with big white houses in loose neighborhoods sprawled in a link adjacent to major concrete arteries.

Many people of that era considered it a "trap" to live the American dream, which is basically what I described. You own a house with three bedrooms, and a few acres

(hectares) of freshly cut grass, a family car, and for the husband, a forty-hour job that brings in enough money to keep the wife home to take care of things. In 1958, most Americans had just this. The country was on a gold standard, social security looked... secure, and most whites didn't feel guilty about the black man's plight, because it looked like the courts had fixed that wrong-doing.

In the first half of the century, America, our citizens perceived, had saved the world from German fascists twice, and the split between East and West insured that the Germans wouldn't rise again. Americans had been the backbone of the UN mission to save the free half of Korea, and while Russia had procured a bomb, MAD would prevent them from using it.

"They looked far and wide for injustices, but their parents were benevolent toward them, and made these evils disappear as soon as they were pointed out. Travel became safer, food became more plentiful, and generally, men lived more equally for a time. So the newly self-exiled band searched beyond the protective seas guarding over their own land, and overlooked how their countrymen could improve things in distant lands. They found people with many core similarities, but their lives were not prosperous and just. The exiles found that their fellow countrymen lent assistance to these people, but treated them differently, too. The parchment that granted the countrymen freedoms in their own lands didn't apply to people living elsewhere, so when the conventional countrymen lent distant people help against others, they didn't necessarily bless these needy people with the rights given in the parchment."

You've all seen the photo of the Vietnamese cop carrying out the execution of the suspected VC sapper, right? The parchment equals the law, and the law guarantees due process. That VC (we're pretty sure he was guilty these days) certainly didn't get

that, and that moment is a strong part of what I was talking about. Nevermind that the NVA executed some 5-to-15,000 citizens of the city of Hue at that time, the hippies found their demon in Saigon.

Due process didn't have a long tradition in Vietnam, their not being a western civilization. Please recall that when the French arrived, they weren't exactly a liberal democracy, so that's not what they spread.

"Most did this while the formerly culture-less outcasts reintegrated into society not quite as victors, but with a measure of power strong enough to preempt their countrymen from effectively outreaching across the seas again."

Simply put, the hippies became influential enough to put us on an isolationist path, or failing that, institute the Powell Doctrine. Don't make me explain; just search 'Powell Doctrine,' please.

Then I reach the point where it ties into Roger Gordan, and real-life people of this mold, like Oliver North:

"This new status quo saddened many of the returning conventional countrymen..." et cetera. The years after the 1973 were demoralizing to those that cared about the military institution. Saigon fell, Pol Pot slaughtered nearly a million, Soviet hardware all of a sudden seemed better than ours. (The MiG 25 turned out to be just a steel rocket, and those superior Russian tanks weren't reliable, especially the automatic loaders.)

Iran fell, Afghanistan fell. We were henpecked by OPEC. The Warsaw Pact outnumbered us in Europe, and the draft eroded military talent.

To counter all this, many people took matters in their own hands. Ross Perot contracted his own rescue team to evacuate his employees from Iran, find POWs in Vietnam, and sabotage equipment the radicals in Iran could have used against us.

Roger Gordian evolved these stop-gap measures, and developed everything the Power Plays series attributes to him.

All he needed were some great personnel on his side.

Enter Paul Evens. His introduction is pretty straightforward. Because his background is interesting, I didn't feel guilty in exposition writing. Paul's mind prefers processing math, science, and applied subjects, rather than the humanities. In that way, he's like a lot of men. Coupled with that is a dislike of the arguments presented in colleges.

Example: You have a scholar giving a lecture on Harry Truman and his thought processes that led to his decision to use the atomic bomb. You nod your head, finding reason with his points. Truman had indeed written a letter that stated he believed whites were superior to blacks and Asians- way back in 1911. The lecturer points out that Truman was short; this scholar believes that gave Truman an inferiority complex. Your mind is making a connection, when the professor says Truman's motto was "the buck stops here." From these fragments of evidence, the professor concludes that:

- Truman didn't see Japanese as humans because he thought whites were better.
- Short people are evil.
- He had to take responsibility.

Therefore, the short insecure racist had to make certain no one considered him weak, and this insecurity (short people are evil!) trumped the little concern he had for Asian lives. After stating this from several tangents, the audience believes the professor.

But Paul Evens interrupts the concluding statement, shouting “that racist integrated the armed forces, you Stink!”

Evens walks out, tossing campus security aside on the way out. Such is his measure of contempt for the academic culture. (Note: that lecture actually took place at the University of Idaho, at least when I saw it. No one cared.)

I designed the character to abhor fuzzy logic. He hates debates, but if someone expresses an opinion asinine enough, he’ll lose his typical cool.

Same lecturer: “The Japanese internment camps were a racist policy!”

Evens screams “Pingfan!” The Pingfan facility was a Japanese biological weapons complex that manufactured anthrax and other plagues. As many as 200,000 Chinese died under attack from Japanese biological weapons. By Paul’s reasoning, their best chance of infecting the American civilian population was through acts of terrorism. From there, he could lay out a proof that the internment was justified, and no one could convince him otherwise.

From there I just added details I know about the Heartland, and brought them into what I know about Roger Gordian. On the way, Evens and another original character, Robin Molina, establish a brotherly bond, kind of.

Of course, there is much more to Tying The Gordian Knot, including a very thick and intriguing plot, and lots of assistance from many interesting people. In the following section, I’ll sketch an outline of exactly what the plot is, list the soundtrack, and explain the weapon systems used in the story.

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.2 Deconstructing the Gordian Knot: Soundtrack

The return is here; meaning the end of the story is imminent. The author has finally settled his anguish over the soundtrack, and will soon finish the story as well. That means settling some thoughts about it by penning some thoughts in this supplemental feature.

The Music

Some writers of fan fiction claim to take the soundtrack selection process for their stories very seriously, then there are those that actually do. Most simply select a listing of songs they think fits well with their scenes, usually just picking top forty hits, usually of a ‘darker’ variety. This is often as ad hoc and thoughtless as the stories themselves, and a careful observer will note that the songs selected are all videos, and no souls. Moreover, it is usually the case that all the songs selected are copyrighted studio recordings.

Tying The Gordian Knot takes a different approach, as many of the songs selected are not commercially available in the United States, are concert bootlegs, or aborted studio recordings. The track listing for the basic soundtrack CD, measuring eighty minutes, is below:

1. *Fast Cars*- U2
2. *Murder By Numbers*- The Police
3. *Ash* (from the Blackstone single)- Gackt
4. *Alive* (Mookie Blaylock Demo)- Pearl Jam

5. *Neo Universe*- L'Arc-En-Ciel
6. *One Tree Hill* (12-26-1989)- U2
7. *Flying People*- Core of Soul
8. *Blowin' in The Wind*- Bob Dylan
9. *In A Little While* (concert unknown)- Hanson
10. *Kite* (recorded at Slane Castle)- U2
11. *Knocking On Heaven's Door*- Bob Dylan
12. *Lemon*- U2
13. *Van Diemen's Land* (Rattle and Hum movie rip- The Edge
14. *Mercy*- U2
15. *Stay* (Far Away, So Close!)- U2 (Live radio recording in Dublin on the Zoo TV Tour, 1993)
16. *Slide Away*- Michael Hutchence & Bono
17. *Times Are A-Changing'* (recorded in November of 2000)- Eddie Vedder

This basic track listing captures the stoic intensity of the story well and also doesn't suffer from overexposure. This has the benefit of allowing the music to mean something in terms of the story. *Fast Cars*, for example, wasn't released in the United States, so it hasn't developed a massive meaning to this date. This isn't true for track two, for it saw wide distribution. Luckily, it hasn't received radio airplay and didn't have a release as a single, so there is some room for the story to co-opt the meaning of the song.

Like *Murder By Numbers*, I chose *Ash* early in the project to fit a mood. Although a Japanese language song, it carries a lot of meaning.

Another recording of track four is probably Pearl Jam's biggest hit, but this demo is very charming and raw. If I'm not mistaken, this recording was a part of the very first demo tape the band recorded with Eddie Vedder. As I understand the story, they recorded just after Ed returned from surfing one day.

Track five was another early pick, one made after... watching the video. Another Japanese rock song, this one carries the quixotic mood of Roger Gordian during some of his achievements.

Track six has no relation to the HBO series of the same name. A careful reading of the lyrics only should indicate why this song is a part of the soundtrack. It was recorded in Dublin, and is a personal favorite of mine among bootleg recordings. It also expresses the mood of the Ma'dan Marsh Arabs really well, although the band meant it for the Maori of New Zealand, I believe. It also rules over the studio version.

Core of Soul is a Japanese pop band. I originally meant to use a Mandarin language cover of this song to be the anthem for my protagonists' stay in Macau, but I simply didn't like that version as much (and I couldn't tell it apart from a Korean cover with a nearly identical label).

On my personal copy of the soundtrack, Bob Dylan's *Blowin' in the Wind* is a studio version, but any good bootleg version can fill the role in any copy of the CD, for the message of the song is what's vital. I'd rather not have a universal standard on this track, so fill it in any way you feel is fitting.

With track nine, you must think I'm crazy. It is a concert cover. When it first came to me, I thought it was a boot, but it turns out to have been professionally recorded for a live album. This recording, just like the great original on *All That You Can't Leave Behind*, tells you all you need to know about the sentimentality of the lead character.

Kite is just a perfect image song for a tired repo man with mild autism taking the back door back into soldiering, his professional calling. My original character, Paul Evans, has *Kite* swelling in his lungs.

Knocking On Heaven's Door can be any boot recording, but on my personal version, it is the studio. It expresses the general malaise of the men when they think of the divorces from the services they belonged to. They are all private military contractors that belong to larger institutions they took pride in, after all.

Track twelve is another breaking of the rules I set for the story's soundtrack, but serves as a crucial motif in a great scene involving the antagonist plotting.

Van Diemen's Land is now called Tasmania, but in the context of the story, this song represents the emotions of Nigel Braun, a character largely adrift from civilization.

I had *Mercy* before it officially existed, and I'm still not sure of its legal status. It is another one of those great songs that isn't linked to anything in the public mind, thankfully. It describes perfectly the bond the characters hold for one another, and Evans for his family. Beyond that, I can't explain why it fits, but it does.

This version of *Stay* (Far Away, So Close!) comes from a promotional CD handed

out to hype the Zoo TV tour. It serves as a window for understanding what's beneath the stoicism of Paul Evans.

Slide Away was an unfinished song recorded by Inxs singer Michael Hutchence before he died. Though not a boot or an outtake, it is simply perfect for carrying the mood of my project.

The concluding recording is perhaps the most essential track. If I were to pick a theme song for the entire project, this would be it. The writer of the song would probably be shocked I'd give it so much meaning for private military contractors, but the song describes their attitudes perfectly. Many of my characters, particularly Evans, are living second lives through a method conventionally frowned upon. Again, I'm well aware this isn't what the writer meant for his song, but that's the nature of Folk, the music doesn't stay under your control, and others will adopt it to their lives. That's actually the most appealing thing about folk traditions.

Alternatives

The essentials come with supporting track listings, including more copyrighted and popular studio recordings left off the essential set. The author plans to set up an iMix listing these in the future. These will include *Rock The Casbah* by The Clash, *Desert Rose* by Sting, and a song barely cut from the essentials, *The Shadow Proves The Sunshine* by Switchfoot. The list will be short to keep the collection cheap. It will come with a companion in the form of another short boot and outtake listing mixed with a few J-rock tracks.

Typewriter King at home in
Oklahoma

