

Pax Americana Chapter 51 – Out of the Frying Pan

"A man has honor if he holds himself to an ideal of conduct though it is inconvenient, unprofitable, or dangerous to do so."

Walter Lippman

"Integrity is not a conditional word. It doesn't blow in the wind or change with the weather. It is your inner image of yourself, and if you look in there and see a man who won't cheat, then you know he never will."
Unknown

You need only reflect that one of the best ways to get yourself a reputation as a dangerous citizen these days is to go about repeating the very phrases which our founding fathers used in the great struggle for independence.

Attributed to Charles Austin Beard (1874-1948)

Cocooned in the mummy bag and wrapped up like a papoose in the snow sled, Brentwood's vision was restricted to almost straight up. He watched the snow suddenly appear out of the grey fuzzy sky. He could hear the zip of rounds ripping through the forest around him, but the battle now seemed to be falling further and further behind. The pair of white camouflaged soldiers labored in the cold with their burden, their heavy breathing and the crunch of their skis through the snow fell into a rhythmic beat that lulled Brentwood into a shadowy consciousness.

The next several hours were filled with flashes of reality surrounded with grey mists of unfocused and drifting. He remembered being lifted up and into a loud and vibrating vehicle that suddenly forced gravity to press down on him. Flashes of visions danced around in his head as someone suddenly stuck something sharp into his arm, which then felt a creeping cold slowly advance up to his shoulder. He recognized the bag hanging overhead and realized that he now had an IV flowing its juices into him. The flight seemed to last for hours or maybe days before roughly alighting on the earth again and after further jostling Brentwood now found himself in the back of an ambulance.

When next his vision focused he could tell that he was in a hospital....somewhere.

Mickey Davis emerged from the tree line and crunched through the snow to

where Dr. Anders was standing some thirty yards into the clearing. Both men were nearly invisible in the falling snow in their white out camouflage with erratic slashes and smudges of black and brown. Even their AR's were cammied to match.

"Did he make it out OK?" Anders asked his medical colleague.

"Yeah Doc. Looks like they got away clean."

"Casualties?"

"We've got a couple of nicks and scratches. One clean leg shot...all meat, I've got Nancy prepping him for you."

"And the other side?"

"Several wounded, but they managed to carry them off. Left two dead behind." He answered matter of factly.

"See to it they receive full honors."

"Doc?"

"It's their masters that I want to see hanging from the nearest tree Mickey, not their minions. Those men were just following orders, right or wrong. We want the men that gave those orders." He answered sternly.

Mickey gave a strange look at his friend.

"Do you think this was all that smart....letting them take back Brentwood? I was just getting to like that bureaucratic paper pusher."

"I don't know Mickey, I sure hope so. There are times that information can be more valuable than bullets. We need a contact like him deep within the system. Besides which the injuries that he sustained in that damn fall is beyond anything we can provide at the moment."

"But will he be our mole...or well he spill the beans about us?"

"There is always a chance, but yes I think he'll be our patriot on the inside. No guarantees though." The Doc turned and looked back towards the village.

"Speaking of moles...."

Mickey ejected a partial magazine and snapped in a fresh one, checked the load and turned towards the same direction.

The pair trudged back through the falling snow to complete a very unpleasant task.

The suit knocked on the inner door of the Homeland Directors office and then entered.

“Mr. Director, we have him! The mission was a success!”

The Director looked up from the pile of paperwork spread across his desk and pounded his fist onto the solid walnut top.

“YES! YES! YES! It’s about time something went right around here! What’s Davis’ condition?”

“Looks like they worked him over pretty good, Sir. He’ll be going into surgery...”
The Young Turk looked at his watch. “Oh... he should already be there.”

“Worked him over....how bad?”

“Well Sir, the initial report from the Radiologist was that they had basically fractured the entire side of his face.”

“My GOD!”

“Yes, Sir. However, the surgeon I spoke with on the phone felt that while it looked bad on X-Rays, she seemed pretty confident that the damage could be repaired.”

“Good – Good – Good, and the casualties from the raid?”

“Four wounded, two KIA, Sir. The extraction went smoothly, only...”

“Only what?”

“Well....err....sir, we’ve lost contact with our mole inside the rebel camp.”

“Oh.....hmmmm. Well we’ve got Brentwood back. I guess sacrifices had to be made.”

“Yes Sir, sacrifices.”

As Brentwood drifted back into consciousness he could hear the hum of the air conditioning system. His head was nearly covered in bandages such that he

could only see out of his right eye, which phased in and out of focus. Something or someone was standing by the door. His vision finally cleared and the image of a uniform....a uniform and a battle rifle came into view. The face seemed somehow familiar, but he couldn't remember....his thoughts were too fuzzy, and try as he might, he couldn't focus his thoughts on any one thing.

The Marine standing guard leaned back and with his free hand pressed the nurses call button on the wall.

"Nurse, this is Gunnery Sergeant Talford, the patient in room 313 is awake now, over."

"Thank you, I'll send someone right down." She giggled. "Marine you don't need to say over... over."

"Force of habit, Ma'am... out."

Brentwood could just make out the nametag on the cammie uniform.

"Talford?" He said to himself.

"Sir?"

"Do I know you....I think....somehow....familiar?"

Malcolm rummaged through the pantry, carefully avoiding the temptation to look in the refrigerator. He didn't want to know what was dripping out past the door seals. The small puddle on the floor in front smelled bad enough as it was. He grabbed several cans of peaches, some applesauce, an unopened pepperoni sausage and several juice boxes and retreated to the garage with the two children following close behind him. On the steps leading into the garage he sat down and began to open the cans up and set everything out.

Sarah and Jesse, still cautious stood several feet away eyeing the tempting meal he was setting out for them.

"Go ahead, kids, get started on the peaches and I'll slice up some of this here pepperoni." He looked up at them. "Come on."

Sarah edged closer and carefully grabbed the peach can with the fork jutting out of it and pulled it back to where Jesse was waiting a few feet away. Together, they hungrily attacked the peaches and the juice boxes.

As Malcolm sliced up the pepperoni he questioned the two small children.

“So Sarah, where’s your mommy and daddy?” He pushed the plate of pepperoni slices towards the pair.

Sarah looked at Malcolm and then back again at the plate.

“Your mommy and daddy... are they nearby?”

Sarah looked up slowly at Malcolm.

“The black men with guns took them away... Jesse and me hid like mommy told us to. We hid real good. They never did find us... but... but... mommy never came back to get us like she promised.”

“The black men? Do you mean men whose skin was my color?”

Sarah shook her head. “No....the men was white, but they wore army clothes that were black and they had big guns like yours.” She pointed at the AR sitting across his lap.

“How long ago did the ‘black men’ come and take your mommy and daddy away... do you remember?”

“It was a long time.” She scrunched up her face trying to figure out the question. “More than five days... way more than that. Jesse and me have been alone for a really really long time.”

He stood up, stepped into the garage several paces, and turned to watch the pair as they cleared the plate.

“Now what in the hell am I going to do?” He wondered standing there.

With the children occupied voraciously consuming the open cans of fruit and applesauce, he quickly set about rearranging the CJ. The old Jeep was a workhorse, not a passenger vehicle, yet somehow he needed to find room for both gear and these two kids. He pulled the gear that he had already stowed in the Jeep and stacked it along side. Then stared at the inside seating arrangement for a while trying to figure out how to stow two young children and all the gear he had located into this get away vehicle.

Just what the hell am I going to do with two kids....that aren't even mine? he thought to himself.

He knew it was going to be nearly impossible for him to escape this nightmare now. He turned to watch the kids finish up the last bit of pepperoni. *And now I've got two little ones in tow, with no idea where their parents or even their relatives*

might be found. He turned back to the task at hand...."THE BACK SEAT!"

Malcolm grabbed the tool kit and on the workbench and a tape measure. The back seat of this old CJ was just the right size if he was careful. He removed the passenger seat from the front but left the mounting brackets. Then he lined up the backseat on top of it and was surprised to find that the mounting holes lined up almost perfectly. It took less than an hour to install the back seat up front and create a bench seat on the passenger side. This also cleared out the back of the Jeep to carry even more gear. *Thank God for cordless drills,* Malcolm thought to himself as he mounted the middle passenger seatbelts and then the extra Jerry can holders into the now empty back bed of the Jeep.

The children watched quietly from the garage steps as Malcolm arranged and rearranged the back to stuff in even more gear. He had found a couple of extra sleeping bags and tied them to the roll bar. Every square inch of space was filled with extra food, water, ammo, and camping equipment with room for the two kids as well. He stood back, satisfied.

The light was fading outside as he completed his task and now his thoughts turned to the next phase of his escape. Where to go? Hell he wasn't even sure where he was.

Damian looked out over the white blanket that covered the remains of his city. In his mind the snow somehow had a way of making everything look clean, dormant, waiting for something to happen. The Jacobson's had, by hook or by crook, managed keep the castle in power. He chuckled to himself. Even he had taken to calling their compound the castle. Well, he guessed it was, in a way. The only light that seemed to shine in this city at night came from their compound. There were fires out there beyond the perimeter walls, to be sure, as survivors of the devastation that struck out of the blue struggled to hang on.

He wished he could bring them all inside the protective walls that surrounded him now. He wished there was some way to repair the damage, to heal this broken community. Well, maybe there was, the elders of the castle had probably taken the first steps this afternoon. Damian had been called to an unscheduled meeting in the Great Room. The space had once been a small cafeteria on the first floor of one of the primary buildings that made up one of four main buildings of the castle. Now it served not only as a cafeteria, but as a church on Sundays, a daycare space during the week, and a meeting hall at night. Today the children were absent and the room was filled to capacity as he walked in.

His grandfather and several of the older residents sat behind the large table at the end of the small hall. There were an equal number of elder men and women sitting at the table and Damian felt a shiver go up his spine for a second and he

hesitated just for a moment as he looked around the room.

“Come on down and join us, son.” The old cragged voice of his Grandfather spoke to him.

Damian walked forward and stood before the elders.

“Grandfather... what’s going on here?”

“Civilization.” His Grandfather answered.

Damian cocked his head slightly to the side.

“Whatcha mean, civil-eye-zation?”

“Damian, son, yo’ done a good ting here boy. A real good ting. But itz time we all started ta carry the ball, ‘stead of putting all da biz-ness on you.”

Damian stood silently and listened.

“We been talking, you know howz ol’ folks is.” He gestured to both sides of the table. “An we made up this here council, a council of elders, like they usta have back in de old dayz in the old country.”

Damian looked up and down the eight elderly faces sitting at the table. He recognized each and everyone and had to admit that they were the one’s he constantly sought advice from. They were wise in years, careful in attitude, patient with youth and strong in spirit. He couldn’t think of a better group to lead the community, but was he out of a job, he wondered? Had he been replaced suddenly?

“So where duz that leave me, Grandfather?”

“Right where you is, boy! Right where you is!”

Damian again cocked his head slightly.

“We got eight elders here on dis council, four men and four women....and you, boy.”

“Me...but....I’m not...”

“Not what? Youz is da reason dat we even here in da first place boy. If’n not for you we’d all be worm meat by now. No, boy, you sit on the counsel as the Warleader and tie breaker....if’n you agree dat is.”

“Warleader and tie breaker?”

“Son, we know’d a good ting when we gots it. You’re quick under pressure, smart where it counts and you got a good head on your shoulders dare. Councils are no good when the shit is hitten the fan, need a Warleader to lead the fight. One man, quick, sharp ‘n’ effective. You done already proved dat. And a tiebreaker. On de odder stuff, when the council can’t decide, you break the tie. We trust you, son. You’ll make the right decision for the community.”

The old man leaned forward. “We already took da vote. You got the job....if you’ll take it.”

Damian looked around the assembled room of nodding heads. He had never been responsible for anything in his entire life and certainly not for the welfare of an entire community, one that was in the midst of war and disease. He felt a sudden weight settling down upon his shoulders. Then he looked back at his Grandfather and all the Grandparents sitting at the table before him. He knew that if he crossed this line he couldn’t turn back. But... wasn’t the hardest part over? They were, in fact, already a community joined together and working together to survive. Nothing would change that. Only now it would be official. He would be “The Warlord” of the castle. They trusted him. No one had ever trusted him before.

“Yes, Grandfather.” He looked up and down the table. “Grandfathers and Grandmothers....I’ll take da job.”

Damian looked out over the cold city from the rooftop. He wondered if this was how governments got started in the first place...with tribal councils. Elders that determined the day-to-day needs and operations of the village and Warlords that defended the village. He wondered just where this would end up. He wondered if it would work.

He didn’t know. But he did know that he would do his best to see that his people did survive the insanity that had fallen on the world. He was a leader now and he would act like one. He would set the example. Suddenly, he felt so unprepared, so limited in abilities. He looked up into the cold night sky. A few stars broke through the cloud cover here and there.

“God, if youz listening to this poor child I needs your help. Deez are good people here. Dey deserve better den me, but me is what dey got. I could use a little help here.....oh who is I kidding....I could use a lot of help here.”

Damian felt a wave of warmth pass over him and it sent a shiver down his back. Just then he heard the crunch of snow under foot and turned to see his Grandfather approaching him.

“What you doing boy up here in da cold?”

“Just asking for a little help Grandfather.”

“From who?”

“God.”

“Dat is good to hear, son. You keep right by the Lord and he’ll keep right by you.”
The old mans hands gripped the young Warlords shoulder.

”I don’t know, Grandfather, we might be asking a lot.”

“Don’t never hurt to ask, son. Now come inside before you catch your death of cold. I’ve got a good fire going and some of dat hot cider you like warming up. Besides wit, it’s Christmas Eve and Santa don’t like gawkers on rooftops when he’s going about his business!”

“Grandfather! You don’t expect me to believe...”

“I ain’t expecting nuttin der boy, excepting you getting your sorry cold ass down stairs and in front of dat fire. Or you be getting a lump of coal in yer stockin in da morning! Now GET!”

The old man watched his grandson disappear through the roof access door. Just before he entered the door he turned and looked up to the night sky.

“Lord, dis poor wretched child be askin’ for a small favor from you. Lord, please watch out for my Grandson. He’s a good man, Lord. But he’s fillin’ mighty big shoes. Keep your eye on him and help him if you’re a mind to.”

“GRANDFATHER, YOU COMING?”

“Right behind you boy, right behind you.....tank you Lord....Amen”

Desert Doc

Pax Americana 52 – Into the Fire

"America is at that awkward stage. It's too late to work within the system, but too early to shoot the bastards."

Claire Wolfe, 101 Things To Do 'Til the Revolution.

"The Democrats seem to basically be nice people, but they have demonstrated time and again that they have the management skills of celery. They're the kind of people who'd stop to help you change a flat, but would somehow manage to set your car on fire. I'd be reluctant to trust them with a Cuisenart, let alone the economy."

Dave Barry

What other governments have / What our government has instead

Kickbacks / Subsidies

Indoctrination centers / Public schools

Propagandists / Government spokespersons

Government censors / Network Standards

Thought control / Political correctness

Dissidents / Crackpots

Refugees / Homeless

Political prisoners / Morals offenders

Forced labor / Community service

Black markets / Organized crime

Secret police / Elite anti-terrorism

Resistance movements / Terrorist militias

Invasion and occupation / Strategic presence

"Waiting periods are only a step. Registration is only a step. The prohibition of firearms is the goal."

Janet Reno, December 10th, 1993 [Associated Press]

Malcolm had completed the reconfiguration of the Jeep by the time the light finally failed and the darkness of evening closed in. It was strange how dark a place could become when all the lights in the community were out. Not a single streetlight was functioning anywhere in this small town. The abandoned and empty homes stood like silent specters in the ghostly moonlight that filtered through the sparse cloud cover. The house he was now hiding in seemed especially dark and the little ones were becoming quite anxious in this unfamiliar surrounding.

Now what? Malcolm thought to himself. Should he hide out here with the children and wait out the searching troopers or should he attempt to run, possibly putting the two little ones in even more danger? And if he were to run....where would he

run to? Their parents had obviously been carted off by someone, but to where? And where and how could he locate relatives that they didn't even know the whereabouts of. The more he thought of this situation the more he disliked it. He had gone from the rock to beyond the hard place...or so he thought.

The steady "Wop-Wop-Wop" of the Blackhawk helicopter growing louder as it approached the neighborhood overhead unexpectedly interrupted his inner conversation. The hair on the back of his neck abruptly stood up and sent a shiver down his spine. This was not good! He turned to the children and in a whisper bid them to silence. He quickly slinked up to the garage door window and carefully from the corner of the glass scanned the street. There was movement up in at the far end of the block. His eyes strained to discern exactly what was going on. It took only seconds for him to realize that it was now or never as he witnessed the steady progression of several Humvee's slowly moving up the street as two teams of troopers kicked in each front door and entered the empty homes. Homes that were all empty save one...this one.

Malcolm made a quick evaluation of his situation. Two little kids, one jeep packed and ready to go, food and water for a week – maybe more, one military M16, four pouches of magazines – three mags each...say three hundred and fifty rounds give or take, the Beretta and the little Ruger twenty-two. Against one helo, probably armed, God knows how many Security Troopers, Humvees and what ever else happens to be around. Not the best of Vegas odds in his book.

He looked out the window again. At the rate they were moving down the block they would be here within the next half hour. "SHIT!" he cursed to himself. He just caught a glimpse of one of the dogs he seen when he first arrived in the town. They were using dogs too! There was no way he and the children could possibly hide from his pursuers if they were using dogs. DAMN! He was not about to abandon these two kids...but? He quickly moved to the Jeep and opened up the two sleeping bags that lay on top of the gear in the back.

"Sarah, Jesse, come here quick! We have to get out of here!"

Sarah with her little brother in tow joined Malcolm beside the Jeep.

"Are the bad men coming?"

Malcolm hesitated and then answered the little girl.

"Yes Sarah, they are coming, but we won't be here when they arrive."

Her voice cracked. "They took my mommy and daddy....Mr. Malcolm...I'm, I'm scared." Jesse clung to his big sister.

"So am I child, but we won't let that stop us. Quick, get in here." Malcolm lifted

her up and into the Jeep. "I want you and your little brother to sit down here."

He placed her on the floor of the passenger side of the Jeep. Then he sat Jesse in with her and wrapped the two sleeping bags around them. He remembered some metal that he had seen earlier and grabbed the sheet of metal and dropped it inside the door frame and wedged it in there between the outside of the passenger seat and the body with the sleeping bags which would double as cushions. The children would be about as low and safe as he could make them under the circumstances. He added more loose blankets until he was sure they would not fly about in what he anticipated was going to be a wild ride. Malcolm then stripped off the soft-top cover and strapped down the frame and windscreen. A spider web bungee cord covered everything in the back and secured all the gear there. He quickly jumped up to the window and checked on the progress of the advancing search team. They were now about half way down the block and quickly approaching. Then he remembered the wine bottles near the back door in the recycling bin!

Gathering up a dozen or so he quickly filled them with gasoline, slopping a goodly amount on the garage floor... 'oh well', ripped strips in the towel hanging near the backdoor and stuffed them into each bottle. He chanced another quick look. They were now two houses closer and had reached just past the middle of the block. He wedged the dozen or so bottles into a plastic milk crate and secured them with the passenger seatbelt. The M-16 was locked and loaded, the pistols were ready and now for the diversion. Grabbing several of the extra Molotov cocktails that he had left near the door he disappeared into the backyard.

Thank God the asshole I took this gear from was a smoker, he said to himself as he pulled the Bic lighter from his shirt pocket and lit the first cocktail. At the back yard fence, he whipped the first of three burning bottles towards the sliding glass door of the house directly behind his hide out. By some miracle of desperation he nailed the large plate glass door on the first try and it shattered from the impact of the liquid filled wine bottle. The second bottle fell short of the second neighbor's window and shattered against the outside wall. The third bottle arched neatly through the air and crashed through the kitchen window scattering its volatile contents across the room. By the time that Malcolm had dashed back to the shelter of the garage, ducked into the darkness shutting, and locked the door behind him, the interiors of both houses were becoming engulfed in flames.

He stole a glance out the corner garage door window and could see that his efforts had been rewarded. He quickly ducked his head and caught the image of two of the searching Humvees dashing past to investigate the sudden disturbance on the next block. The troopers from across the street that he could see down the block had abandoned their search and were crossing to skip over to the next street. It was now or never. He unlocked the garage door and as quietly as he could he pushed it open. He jumped back into the Jeep, said a brief

prayer, and turned the key.

The stocky six-cylinder coughed once and fired up. Tugging on his seatbelt he dropped the clutch and the Jeep lurched out of the garage. The jackrabbit was on the run. He jerked the Jeep right and ran across several lawns before he hit the blacktop five houses down. Instead of following the path of the two Hummers that had just blasted past less than a minute earlier he caught the first left and roared down the empty road away from the arson he had created. The air ripped at his unprotected face as the Jeep fled into the night. He looked quickly about for the helo that was up there somewhere but couldn't find it. After traveling for five or six blocks the residential street opened upon a larger two lane up ahead. Which way to go...which way to go? He knew the direction from which he had escaped, that was on the south end of town. He pointed the Jeep in the opposite direction and rounded the corner right into a roadblock!

The troopers standing next to the Humvee seemed dumbfounded as the CJ 5 rounded the corner and sped towards them. Malcolm shifted the Jeep into high gear and grabbed the M16 slung across his chest. Steering with his left hand he pulled the butt of the rifle into his right shoulder and cut loose at the gaping troopers. He did not expect to hit much of anything, but he hoped to at least shake them up and upset any return fire they might attempt. The first trooper jerked under the impact of the first rounds and slid down the side of the vehicle. The second trooper fared better and dove for the cover of the Hummer, totally forgetting about his rifle that was lying across the hood of the vehicle. The Jeep veered to the right around the front of the Hummer and Malcolm locked up the brakes. He continued to fire rounds at the trooper struggling to become one with the blacktop under the Hummer and saw his legs jerk several times as bullets met flesh. He popped off his seatbelt and leaped from the Jeep pumping more rounds into the troopers to make sure they were down for the count.

"What the HELL AM I DOING!?!?" Malcolm said aloud as he grabbed the two M-16's from the hood and stripped the web gear from the dead troopers. His heart pounding in his ears he raced back to the Jeep and jammed the rifles behind the passenger seat and threw the web gear on top of them. With shaking hands he lit a Molotov cocktail and whipped it into the blacktop beneath the Hummer creating a nasty fondue in the process. Then with gears grinding he jammed it into first and the Jeep jerked forward and continued his exodus. He stuck to the main boulevard, praying for guidance in his flight to freedom. He constantly scanned the road behind him in the rearview mirror and the sky above.

Over the wind and the whine of the engine Malcolm yelled to the two children buried in the protective blankets and sleeping bags. "ARE YOU KIDS OK IN THERE?"

Sarah's hand pulled the blankets down and exposed her face. He could see the fear there and tried to reassure her yet could not hear her response over the

noise of the engine and the wind. But there was no time for further conversation as he caught a blur of movement in the rearview mirror...the race was on. The powerful Hummer roared out onto the main street and launched into pursuit of the fleeing CJ5!

The pair jockeyed for position on the blacktop but just as the Hummer was about to come along side Malcolm locked up the brakes and jerked the Jeep to the right passing behind and off down an alleyway. Weaving down the dark alley he momentarily lost his pursuer, but now they knew his approximate location. The Jeep emerged back onto a parallel road and Malcolm kicked it back into gear.

He was now locked into a deadly cat and mouse game that could cost him not only his life, but the two lives of the little orphans that had been thrust into his care, if he could not escape. But Malcolm was determined that he would escape and like a mad man he cut down alleys, reversed direction time and again, always moving north and west away from the bright fire now burning on the southern edge of town.

Angry hornets buzzed by his head and he suddenly realized the Hummer was back on his tail but this time it had its teeth bared. But hitting a moving vehicle from a moving vehicle is not the easiest thing to do despite everything you've ever seen in the movies or TV. Malcolm kept the Jeep moving, cutting across parking lots, yards, anything that could upset the aim of or slow down the enemy breathing down his neck.

Something "THAWACKED!" into the dashboard, sending sparks into the brisk wind cutting across the hood of the speeding CJ. Malcolm pushed in the cigarette lighter and jerked the Jeep right, then left, then right across a lawn, through a hedge and down another alley. The Jeep bounded out back onto the highway just as the cigarette lighter popped out ready for use. Grabbing it, he pushed it against one of the gasoline soaked rags, an insane maneuver in a fleeing vehicle under fire. There is nothing like ripping through the night riding on a petrol bomb with bullets flying all around you. But desperate times call for desperate measures. The first wick caught fire and soon another wick was lit as well. The fast breeze racing across the bottles swept the flames into the next one.

He ran the Jeep down the middle of the road headed out of town. The Hummer pulled in behind him lining up for the kill when Malcolm tossed the first gasoline bomb into the air. The Hummer swerved madly as the bottle broke twenty or so feet in front of it spraying the flaming liquid fingers out attempting to grasp its target. It was now Malcolm who was maneuvering to position himself directly in front of the pursuer as he tossed one Molotov cocktail after another at the enemy behind him. He was getting the range at about the same time the passenger seat top started to melt. The sixth wine bottle arched majestically through the air and nailed the hood of the Hummer engulfing it in flames and obscuring the vision of the driver, who jinked when he should have jived. The Hummer hit the curb,

tilted, and slammed into the turn signal switching box which spun it sideways and then smack into the turn signal pole which it clipped neatly off at the foot, but not before crushing the two troopers inside into catfish bait.

Malcolm locked up the Jeep and skidded and bounced to a stop forty yards beyond. Unlatching the milk crate of now burning tiki torches, he kicked the volatile bombs out of the Jeep, pulled away from the burning mass and grabbed a blanket to smother the passenger seat back that had begun to burn.

“You two alright down there?”

“Ahhh, ahhh, yeah?” The sudden stillness of the night crashed in upon him. His heart was still racing a thousand miles an hour. “Are we safe yet?”

“Almost, honey, almost.”

He looked back and could see the Humvee’s contents spewed across the intersection where it now laid on its side, mortally wounded and partially impaled by the bent and twisted remains of the light pole. The cocktail’s fire was still working on the hood and would soon engulf the vehicle. A shape caught his eye in the pale moonlight that now cast its silvery shadow across the landscape. He turned the Jeep around and rolled into the debris field.

“I’ll be right back, Sarah.”

He quickly inspected the now smoldering Hummer, its occupants beyond help from this world. Then, backing away, he crossed over to the item that had caught his attention in the first place. Slings his M-16, he reached down and picked up the M-60 machine gun. One bipod was damaged and the barrel looked a little worse for wear. But if he could get it working he would finally have the edge that he needed to survive this game. He hefted the big gun into the back of the Jeep and quickly scanned the remaining debris and the back of the Hummer, grabbing anything that looked valuable to his escape.

The CJ finally reached the edge of town and Malcolm drove down the highway for another twenty or thirty miles before turning off a side road to get into the bush and recuperate from the insanity of this day. He finally pulled into a hillock of thick brush and trees. It was after midnight when he completed snapping the soft-top back up and secured the interior of the Jeep to provide some shelter from the night. Spreading out the blankets and sleeping bags he made make shift beds for the two little ones. He was surprised how quickly they nodded off and slept the bliss of innocence.

Malcolm said a little prayer of thanks. He had not communicated such thoughts in a very long time, but could not ignore his good fortune at the expense of others. He checked on his wards once more before setting down in the moonlight to give

a cursory cleaning to his weapon. In the morning he would inspect the '60 and everything he had acquired this evening. He ran this new inventory through his head as he finished swabbing out the barrel. He had begun the day a prisoner armed with nothing but nerve and desperation. By sheer dumb-ass luck and the grace of God he had expanded his assets to include a Ruger .22, three M-16's, a Beretta nine-millimeter, one badly dinged M-60, an extra barrel for it, and several hundred rounds for each weapon. He had the means of shelter, food, water, transportation and two young wards that depended upon him for their survival but most important of all he was free once again.

He shook his head and chuckled to himself. "I've got to find an easier place to shop!"

Two pairs of eyes watched the troopers from the tree line. Eyes that missed nothing. Eyes that watched with hawkish intent. Eyes that silently took in every movement, every nuance ...studying....learning....waiting. Less than one hundred yards away, a company of Homeland Security troopers went about their business setting up their new command center, from which they would control this small town and the surrounding countryside.

No longer was there any hesitancy in their purpose. The President's recent instructions were explicit and unquestionable. His commands were now gospel, to be followed without question. They, the Homeland Security Force, would be the cornerstone of the President's efforts to take back the nation, to rid it of all dissension and sedition and provide security for all loyal and obedient American citizens. There would be no more tolerance for un-American conduct. You *would conform* by choice or by coercion. The manner didn't matter so long as you presented yourself as a model citizen and didn't question or complain. Such un-American activities could no longer be tolerated.

The two pairs of eyes retreated back into the dark of the surrounding forest. Like wraiths the pair of dark forest dwellers moved swiftly and silently through the underbrush. Legs pounding in rhythm with the internal back beat that would have worn out a rock and roll drummer during a premier solo. Leaping over large fallen trees as if in near flight. Their passage was barely noticed by even the permanent residents of the forest, it was so quick.

The shadows were moving quickly in a great arc through the forest skirting the small suburban sprawl on the leading edge of town that was ever threatening to intrude upon the domain of the massive trees and thick underbrush of this ancient land. Their feet pounded through the failing light in a beat of defiant primal rhythm that kept pace with their thoughts as they raced on. The attack was on and the intended victims didn't even know that they had already lost the battle.

The light was quickly fading as the shadowy pair neared their intended first victims. Their blood was pumping hot and heavy in their veins as they suddenly went to ground. They became the forest, one with the vines and ferns that littered the forest floor. Their breath was quick and humid filled with the moist carbon dioxide that was being pumped out of muscles that seemed hewn from the very rock deep beneath the massive trees.

The eyes in the forest once again focused on the enemy....and waited....and waited....and waited.

A squad of troopers casually cruised along the trail up ahead. The troopers were on patrol, the first line of defense for the main body of the security forces that the pair had been observing for the last several days. The troopers had become complacent through boredom. They failed to take their responsibilities seriously in this backwater community long tamed by their strict occupation. The citizens had finally conceded their inalienable rights to these heavy-handed representatives of a distant government, at least those that had missed the initial exodus into the surrounding wild lands or had not been packed off to the security re-education camps for showing any signs of dissension. Unwilling and now unable to defend themselves and/or stand up for their rights...they now had none.

The troopers strolled along smoking and joking, talking to each other, laughing, neither watching nor even paying any attention to the darkness that was about to close in upon them.

Just a little further.....

The forest wraith closest to the trail slowly reached out its hand and grabbed what appeared to be a thin vine snaking along the ground. Slowly the small vine was drawn taut. They watched...waiting...waiting. The second wraith rose to a low crouch coiling himself in anticipation. Muscles prepared to spring, the heart began pumping its enriched elixir to needed limbs, limbs that would within seconds spring into action. Wicked and deadly action. The troopers never heard the metallic release at the end of the vine. Both wraiths were now moving, quickly through the underbrush. Past the giant ferns, over the fallen limbs that lined the forest floor they gathered speed. The heavy pendulum was moving down from high in the canopy overhead, midway now through its arc gathering speed as it descended from the dark. The shadows neared their targets at increasing speed; they were becoming a blur in the darkness.

The lead trooper heard something, ahead, above, something? One of the tail end troopers thought he heard something also, but off to the side, perhaps a deer?

Then the trap struck viciously. A large log bristling with sharpened spikes

achieved its terminal velocity just before reaching the forest floor and wickedly impaled the first three troopers and swept them from the trail and off into the darkness. A microsecond behind the disappearance of the point elements of the patrol the wraiths burst from the forest undergrowth running at full speed they slammed into the staggering and confused survivors.

The lead wraith opened fire at point blank range with a grizzly old 1911 into the face of the first trooper as he slashed his machete through the soft throat of the trooper standing beside him. Spinning around in a dance of death he brought his machete's back slash whipping viciously through the dark air, severing the remaining tissue and bone, separating the gagging and sputtering trooper's head clean off as the second wraith hit the patrol with equal vengeance. Two more troopers disappeared in his wake as he caved in the face of another with a savage horizontal buttstroke that would have made even the most battle hardened DI cringe. The next victim's throat was ripped out by a wicked bayonet slash before the wraith sent two controlled bursts into the remaining members of the patrol. Behind him the big .45 boomed twice more and the ambush was over.

Like evil incarnate the twin wraiths stood surveying their carnage. Where just seconds before had been a patrol of the living breathing elite of the New World Order, there were now ten very dead troopers. In grizzly fashion they collected the ten heads and stuffed them in a duffle bag. They had a greeting to prepare for the new commander of the Security Forces in town. Hell had just arrived and troopers were on the menu. The pair pulled back into the shadows and disappeared.

Early the next morning, Major Eric Dressler awoke to ten pairs of cold eyes. Ten heads lined up in perfect military formation rested on the chart table of his personal command tent, staring at him with their lifeless eyes. His screams served as reveille for the entire camp.

Miles away, two warriors previously cloaked in forest greens and browns completed their clean up from the ghoulish nights work beside a crystal clear forest stream. Using a handful of fine sand, Todd Curry, former Cadet 2nd Class, scrubbed the dried blood from his skin. Sequoia, a one time pacifist, tree hugger and ardent vegetarian, heated water for a hot cup of tea. They would enjoy the hot liquid warmth, eat and rest for the rest of the day. Tonight, there was much work to be done. A cancer was in the town below that had been slowly spreading. That threat would end in the coming evenings. The enemy of freedom had been located and identified. They would learn to fear the darkness. They would learn to fear the night. **They would learn fear.** For wraiths now stalked the land of the living and for two shadowy young innocents the metamorphosis was complete..... **They had become war.**

Pax Americana 53 – The Chair is Against the Wall...

"War is just when it is necessary; arms are permissible when there is no hope except in arms."

Machiavelli, "The Prince"

"If once the people become inattentive to the public affairs, you and I, and Congress and Assemblies, Judges and Governors, shall all become wolves. It seems to be the law of our general nature, in spite of individual exceptions."

Thomas Jefferson

"A military operation involves deception. Even though you are competent, appear to be incompetent. Though effective, appear to be ineffective."

Sun-Tzu, The Art of War.

There was an explosion and suddenly his world was spinning around inside a box. Smoke and fire began to fill the space. Brentwood was trapped. Choking from the smoke that was quickly filling up the passenger compartment and water that was bubbling in from below he struggled blindly on all fours searching for an exit. Dead bodies and gear kept getting in the way and the flames licked at his clothes. Sudden he found the window and pushed it open into the dark water, but he was still trapped...caught by something unseen holding his legs, he was stuck half in and half out of the vehicle and underwater. He couldn't breath. His lungs were burning as he struggled and clawed at the water's surface just beyond his reach. He was suddenly jolted by a scream that ripped through the very fragment of the water he was suffocating in.

Brentwood awoke in a cold sweat gulping for air and clawing at the covers and sheet that had become wrapped around his legs. His heart was pounding in his ears and every muscle and fiber of his entire body ached and burned. He sat on the edge of the bed panting and terrified.

His bedroom door suddenly burst open and a heavily armed Marine crouched to the side of the doorframe giving the room a quick once over.

"Mr. Davis, are you all right?"

"Ahh....yes...ah...I guess so." He answered through wired jaws.

Brentwood sat there panting and forcing fresh air into his lungs for a few more seconds as the guard made a cursory check of the room. After assuring himself that all was secure he returned to his station by the door.

“Just another nightmare, Sergeant....damn.”

“The ambush, Sir?”

“Yes...I’m afraid it was.” Brentwood got up and moved shakily past the Marine.
“That damn thing just keeps haunting me.”

“Well, Sir, you have been through a lot lately.” The Marine said matter of factly.

Brentwood shook his head slowly and that did nothing to improve his headache as he walked into his kitchen and began to prepare himself a cup of tea to calm his nerves. Between the nightmares, the reconstructive surgery, the post surgical pain, the anguish of worrying if his bosses knew of his “almost” defection and then worrying if the militia thought of him now as a traitor, he wondered if he would ever have another restful nights sleep again.

He sat in the semi-darkness of his living room and sipped the warm liquid through aching teeth. His ever-present bodyguard hovered just out of sight...always there, always near and always heavily armed. Brentwood wondered if he would ever again have a normal life. Then he thought about it and wondered if anyone would ever have a normal life. He would have laughed at the irony of it all, if not for his wired jaw and the pain caused by any but the slightest movements of his facial muscles.

The surgery had gone well and he was expected to recover with little residual damage from the fall....er.... “*the torture*” he had endured at the hands of the rebel militia. It wasn’t his lie – it was “their” assumption, but it would do for now. That he was also suffering from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder was understandable, considering what he had been through over the last six months or so. The Director himself had visited Brentwood in the recovery room and assured him; now that he was safe extra precautions would be taken to guarantee that he stayed that way.

But Brentwood wasn’t convinced that the ever-present guard was there to protect him as much as to keep an eye on him. About the only place that he was allowed to go and not be accompanied by his bodyguard was the bathroom, and he had to insist on that. For now his job was to recover. It had been just under six weeks since his “rescue” from the clutches of the “enemy” and he was scheduled to have all the wiring in his jaw removed in the next few days. After that, he didn’t have a clue what would be expected of him. Back to the office, probably, but to do what? Nothing seemed to have changed the couple of times that he visited his work. The folks there were, of course, happy to see him, except perhaps his junior deputy, the understudy that now was being returned to his old responsibilities. He would bear keeping an eye on. But Brentwood was used to the old corporate/bureaucratic backbiting climbing the ladder game. He was in fact a master of staying out of the bureaucratic line of fire. It was in the real life

that he had failed miserably in staying out of the line of fire.

There was a team of Marines that provided Brentwood twenty-four hour security that was lead by the Gunnery Sergeant that he had met in the recovery room, Gunnery Sergeant Talford. Brentwood was sure that he had met the surely Marine somewhere before but couldn't put the face to the place. But something was nagging at his thoughts just beyond the veil of recognition. He knew this Marine....but from where?

Malcolm awoke with the first grey of dawn in the eastern sky and rolled over beneath the tarp he had wrapped himself up in under the Jeep. Scanning the perimeter from every side, he achingly crawled out into the cold morning air. Checking the charge on his M-16, he then pulled on the web gear and checked on the two little ones sleeping in the back of the Jeep on top of all the gear.

"Oh, to be a kid again." He muttered to himself, as he looked at the sleeping children there.

He then made a brief recon around the hillock that he had pulled into late last night. Frost hung on everything and the air had a wintry bite to it. Patches of snow lingered in the shadows and Malcolm carefully proceeded checking out their location in the light of the new day. His eyes ever watchful, his weapon ever ready, he moved quietly and smoothly taking it all in.

Thirty minutes later, he returned to the Jeep. The kids were still asleep. He had no idea of exactly where they were. The rolling hills and scattered trees and fields told him that he was probably somewhere in the Midwest, but that was a guess at best. The lack of a blanket of snow at this time of the year indicated that he was at least below the regular snowline. But beyond that he was lost.

He quietly tried to extract the small Coleman single burner stove from the back of the CJ without waking the children and failed. Sarah flashed her big eyes at him as he retrieved the stove almost beneath her.

"Go back to sleep little one. I'll have something hot for us in a minute or two."

"Mr. Malcolm...." She said stretching. "Are we safe now?"

"For now, child." He reassured her. "For now we're safe. Now you just stay warm until I get some water heated."

Malcolm stood there for a second sizing up the situation. He considered their present location as adequate for now. They were well hidden from both the main highway, that was several hilltops away, and the secondary road he had used to

find this location. The trees were a concern due to the lack of overhead cover the bare branches provided at this time of the year, but that could be dealt with. If he only had himself to consider he could easily hole up here for a while and catch his breath, but he didn't have only himself to consider. During his recon he had seen the roof of an old barn off in the distance. It looked in pretty bad shape but it was still standing and would at least cut some of the wind off them and provide them cover from anyone flying overhead.

He fixed a quick breakfast for himself and the kids. It wasn't much, instant oatmeal, but it was hot and quickly warmed them all up. For the next hour he went about the business of camouflaging the Jeep with one of the large military surplus canvas tarps he had found in the garage. Then he added a layer or two of squaw wood, clumps of dry grass, and a few shovelfull of dark dirt to break up the bulk and shape of the covered vehicle. He stepped back a bit and was pleased with the results. It would be difficult to distinguish it from the surrounding ground. He hoped it would be enough.

Bundling up the children inside the Jeep to keep them warm, he made sure that they understood that they were to stay there until he returned, which could be an hour or more. As an added precaution, he pulled the wire to the horn so that the children wouldn't accidentally inform the world of their whereabouts and headed out.

It took well over an hour for Malcolm to work his way through the thick woods to a vantage point that overlooked the old barn. It appeared to be abandoned and in pretty poor shape, but it was a standing shelter and would provide just the sort of cover they needed. Careful to take a different way back to the Jeep, it took nearly as long to reach it as the first leg out to check out the barn. It was upon returning to camp that Malcolm nearly had a heart attack. The children were gone!

In a panic he quickly scanned about looking for any trace of their whereabouts. He analyzed every footprint on the ground looking for evidence of their passage. He saw only the images of his own boots and then....there! Two sets of little feet going off into the bush. He quickly took up their pursuit and ran through the brush hot on their trail. Less than a hundred yards from the jeep he found them. Tossing rocks and sticks into a tiny creek that cut across the foot of the hill they were on. His eyes, cat-like surveyed the surrounding woods and open fields looking for any possible threat.

"Sarah! Jesse! GET BACK UP HERE....NOW!" He barked at them through gritted teeth.

The pair jumped, startled by his sudden arrival. He waved them to him, keeping his eyes and his rifle pointed out ever on the defense. The kids hesitated at first and then ran to him as he called to them again.

“Come one kids, I’ve found us a safe place to go! COME ON NOW!”

He herded the pair back up to the Jeep and began to tear down the camouflage covering. As gently as he could he scolded the pair, but he felt that he had to get across the danger of failing to obey his orders. He realized that he probably raised his voice a little and spoke a little harshly. He could tell by the size of their eyes and their fearful, nearly teary-eyed expressions that he at least put the fear of the boogey men, or the Jack Booted Thugs as he thought of them, into their little minds. He didn’t like being harsh with children but felt there was no choice in this matter. Their very lives were at stake, not to mention his own. He finished the scolding with a warm hug for the pair and made sure they understood that he was trying to protect them.

“You both need to do exactly what I tell you so we can find your family...do you understand?”

“My mommy and daddy?”

“Yes...if we can, Sarah, but first we have to get away from the bad men. They won’t let us find your mommy and daddy if they catch us.”

God, what a situation! he thought to himself. *How in the hell am I going to locate any one in this mess?*

The barn proved to be more than adequate for their needs. Old and leaning slightly to one side, missing boards and shingles, and one door hung from only a single hinge; it was never the less perfect for their needs. It looked to Malcolm that it had been a long time since anyone had used it or at least it had not been visited on a regular basis. There was even a make shift workbench and a few shelves built against one wall. He backed the Jeep in and began unloading its contents. He really hadn’t taken the time to properly inventory all his acquisitions and now could spread them out and sort through the mess. Using several of the tarps and bales of old hay, he constructed a small sheltered space in one corner of the barn. The combination of tarps and hay bales made for a surprisingly warm little room for them.

After taking a mental inventory, Malcolm then set about working on the weapons he now possessed. The first priority was cleaning and reloading everything. He fumbled about at first breaking down the M-16’s and the Beretta’s but became more proficient with each effort. The M-60 was a bit of a challenge, but he managed to complete that task with the small instruction booklet that was stashed in the extra barrel bag he had grabbed off the overturned Hummer. The primary barrel on the machine gun was trashed. Looking down the barrel he could tell that there was a slight bend in it. Fortunately the replacement barrel was straight as an arrow and mated with the receiver without a hitch.

Thank God for quick change barrels! Malcolm thanked the gods of war.

The receiver was scratched and deeply scored from its summersault and subsequent trip across the blacktop from the wrecked Hummer, but Malcolm was not interested in cosmetics, just function. He wasn't exactly sure just how he was going to mount the gun on the Jeep, but now he had some serious firepower.

The rest of the day was spent going over all the gear and repacking the Jeep as efficiently as possible. He did not want to take the chance of being caught flat-footed again. The kids, for the most part, entertained themselves as they explored the barn. They discovered a mouse nest exposed when Malcolm constructed their hay bale shelter. The pink babies fascinated the children and he had to warn them not to touch them or the mother would abandon them and they would die. Sarah looked at him in horror.

"She wouldn't come back for them?"

"No, not if they had your smell on them." He answered and carefully placed a new bale on top to protect them from little fingers.

"But our mommy would come to get us if she could."

"Well Sarah, people are different from animals." *Sometimes*, he thought to himself.

"Mr. Malcolm, do you think our mommy is looking for us now?"

"I'm sure she would try if she could."

"Can she find us here?" she said, looking around.

"Sarah, I think the bad men have your parents and won't let them come to look for you. I'm sure if your mommy and daddy could get away they would find you."

"But you got away Mr. Malcolm...so....my mommy and daddy can get away too....right?"

"Well...." He thought for a moment. "Yeah...they can probably get away too, but it's very hard and sometimes you have to wait a long time for the chance."

He tried to reassure her. "I think the best idea is to go to one of your uncles and let your mommy and daddy find you there. Do you know where any of your uncles or aunts lives?"

"My uncle Jack. I like him, he lives in the woods and has a pony that he lets me ride him when we go visiting."

Their conversation seemed to last forever as Malcolm tried carefully to draw out every ounce of information the little seven-year old girl had to offer. It was like trying to blindly construct a jigsaw having no clue as to what the design should end up looking like.

By dinnertime Malcolm had at least a vague idea of where her uncle Jack lived. If what she was telling him could be trusted. The next problem was to find out just where they were right now and then figure out a way for a heavily armed fugitive with two small children to travel across several states and find a needle in a haystack. Piece of cake for an educated man with a Ph.D in history, right?

He had only one thing to say after he tucked the pair into their sleeping bags and later finally hit the sack himself. It was one word that just said it all.

“SHIT.”

It felt strange to be able to move his jaw again. For the first time in a long time Brentwood actually felt good. His face still ached and was sore as hell, and it would be some time before all the healing process was completed, but that damned claustrophobic feeling of this teeth being wired together was finally gone. On top of that today was a special day.

He had practically begged and pleaded with his warden, as he referred to his senior Marine bodyguard, Gunnery Sergeant Talford, to be trained in combat arms. Brentwood had made a promise to himself that he would never again be naked and defenseless. He finally realized that his security was his responsibility and no one else's. It had taken some effort to push through the required paperwork and gain permission for a concealed carry permit, but not even the Director of Homeland Security could find fault in his request. He felt that it was unnecessary with the bodyguards that kept close tabs on him twenty-four-seven. But Brentwood insisted, pleaded, and eventually got his way.

The Gunny even agreed to train the bespectacled bureaucrat provided that he could get the authorization, never for an instant figuring that it would be possible under the current restraints. However, much to his surprise, somehow Brentwood did acquire the proper documents and was now one of the few Americans outside the military and law enforcement communities that could legally carry a firearm. And true to his word the Gunnery Sergeant drove his client down to the FBI ranges at the Marine base at Quantico.

What was even more surprising was how intensely Brentwood took to his new obsession. The Gunny had taught some sharp recruits during his career, but couldn't remember anyone that was such an apt student. Brentwood was like a

sponge, absorbing everything and missing nothing. He was serious, dedicated, and unlike so many of the bureaucratic paper pushers that lived and worked within the beltway that Talford had come in contact with in the past, Brentwood was not the least bit pretentious.

Two weeks later Brentwood had just completed his third string of fire, and he and the Gunnery Sergeant walked out to change out targets. As he stapled up a clean target Talford said something that nearly knocked him for a loop.

“Doc Anders would be very proud of you today, Mr. Davis.”

Brentwood froze at the mention of the militia physician name. He slowly turned his head and stared at the Marine grinning back at him. His thoughts flashed back to the evening before his accident....there at the dinner in Anders cabin. That face, the gunny’s had been there in the back of his mind since the recovery room after his rescue. Gunnery Sergeant Talford....he had first met him at that dinner party, there in militia country!

“HOLY SHIT!”

“Well maybe not quite holy, but I’ll take responsibility for the shit part.” Talford replied.

Brentwood almost lost his balance. “How...could, how...when....you?!”

“I was assigned to make sure when you got home that no one would take advantage of your condition, Mr. Davis, and to keep you safe.” The Gunny picked up the staple gun and completed tacking up the target. “You’re a valuable man, Mr. Davis, if, that is... you are still a patriot?”

It was now the Gunny’s turn to size up the person standing opposite of him.

Brentwood took in a breath and stood up. “Gunny... I’ve always been a patriot.” He said matter of factly. “Just not a very good one.”

“We’ll see about that, Mr. Davis...” Talford patted him on the shoulder and the pair began their walk back to the shooting line. “We’ll see about that.”

Brentwood had just joined the Patriot movement and the American gun culture, lock stock and barrel.

Geneva, Switzerland

A pair of well-dressed executive looking gentleman quietly sipped their coffees in

a private booth that looked out over the lake. The meeting had not been overly long, they rarely were. Most of it was mere formality, the details having been resolved by their minions well before the representatives of the Consortium sat down at the table. Occasionally though there were issues that were addressed only at such meetings and the topic of the subdued conversation over coffees rested on just such an issue.

Jonathan raised his cup almost to his lips and paused. "I am still having difficulty with the direction of this decision."

"I can empathize with your concerns, but surely you see that this is the only viable option under the present circumstances?"

Jonathan brought his cup back to the table. "But Ian, you have no idea the kind of repercussions this action will create."

"I'm sure the board has worked out all the angles before even suggesting such a recourse."

Jonathan leaned forward and lowered his voice to barely above a whisper. "But you don't understand this will not subdue them...instead it will enrage them!"

"Surely you can't suggest that they would not welcome the stability and protection of UN peacekeeping forces in such a crisis situation?" Ian took another sip and shook his head. "No, my friend, the days of the American cowboys and their cavalry riding in at the last minute to save the day are well over. You Americans don't even make movies of such things anymore."

Ian looked out the window at the wintry landscape. "No, my friend. *We* will be the cavalry riding in to save the day and your countrymen will welcome us."

Jonathan shook his head and stared at his cup. "But to take down the President..."

"Oh, come, good fellow, don't think of it like that. We're merely restructuring the global corporate landscape. Think of it as a sort of house keeping exercise."

Ian leaned forward. "Look, Jonathan, we've disarmed every major first world country over the last twenty years. One more shouldn't be all that difficult under the present conditions."

As Jonathan sat back and slowly sipped the last of his cappuccino, the first thought to cross his mind was a comment attributed to Admiral Isoroko Yamamoto following the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor when he said ***'I fear that all we have done is awakened a sleeping giant.'***

The pair finished their coffees a few minutes later and left the little shop headed back to their respective offices. Jonathan waved his driver on and chose instead to walk back the short distance through the light snow fall. He liked the sound of his footsteps crunching in the snow. He liked snow for that matter. It had a way of making the world appear so clean. He realized, of course, that all it did was merely cover up any of the ugliness that might lie beneath. But, for the time being, the world appeared white and virginal. Which was anything but how he felt. He knew that this action was necessary in the natural flow of things. But he still did not like the idea of culling the herd in this fashion. He hoped that the Consortium really knew what the hell they were doing. They were playing a very big gambit and this was not a game of liar's poker.

He arrived in his office a few minutes later feeling a little bit better. The brisk winter air had cleared his head and he was ready for the task ahead. He had a lot of work to do. Planning an assassination was not a task to be taken lightly.

Desert Doc

Pax Americana Chapter 54 – Into the Night

Max glanced back at the Toyota truck hidden under the cut boughs and branches. It wasn't a very good camouflage, but it was going to have to be enough. Their pell-mell flight after Andy had given the word over the radio had brought them here to Johnson's Riding Stables. Actually, they were laying low in the large wooded lot across from the stables. Very little was moving aside from the horses in their paddock, which looked well cared for. Max knew the son of the owners; a man named Willy Johnson, who worked at the stables and lived alone several miles away. Max suspected he was the one caring for the horses. The elder Johnson was not a well man in the best of situations, and now with the power out, the Plague abounding, and the stress of the occupation and quarantine, Max was certain that the old man had succumbed to his myriad illnesses.

He, Lisa and Darcy sat under the pines, dressed in their BDU camouflage clothing. They were seated in a loose triangle facing outward, with their AK-47s cradled on their laps. The forest had begun to darken along with the sky, and long grey shadows lay about. Darcy sat with the earbud of the radio in place, listening intently for any sound from Andy. Max was listening almost as intently. No sound had come from the earpiece in some time, and if Max was concerned, then Darcy was scared. Max was impressed with Darcy's resolve, as she did not key the mic to ask Andy for his status, nor stand up and begin pacing, or even suggest that they go looking for him. They had a plan, and she stuck to it. Her lips pressed together in a firm line, as she frequently twisted the knob on her radio to monitor the several back-up frequencies that they had agreed upon.

As the minutes rolled past, the shadows became longer, the sky darker, until finally it was black under the forests canopy. Max glanced at his watch nervously. Andy was overdue by only an hour, but it felt like an eternity. He dared not use the radio, as the soldiers in town would have discovered that there was no attack, and would suspect it was a diversion. They would be sniffing for any sign of things out of the ordinary, and Max didn't know the sophistication of their radio direction finding equipment. It would be a terrible thing to have come this far only to be foiled by their own lack of patience. The plan called for them to be under cover by now, as they felt certain that the helicopters would be up looking for them with FLIR. He glanced again at Darcy, and saw the worry etched in her face. Lisa was also doing well, though her frequent looks at Darcy showed her concern as well. They froze as they heard rotors in the distance, but they were far of and did not come closer. He hoped they hadn't found Andy.

He heard another, different noise, and alerted the others with a hushed "Ssst."

The noise became louder, and resolved itself into the "Clop-clop-clop" of horses' hooves. In the near blackness lone rider soon came into view, illuminated by an

old railroad-style kerosene lantern. His long duster coat was pulled tightly around him, and a cowboy hat sat upon his head. The man's head was bent low, as if deep in thought. The man turned into the driveway of the house, and finally dismounted the horse near the barn. Before disappearing into the barn, he gave his mount a few long strokes to the neck, and the buzz of quiet speech not heard floated to the hidden listeners. Soon, soft yellow light began to show through the windows of the barn and horses walked unbidden to the rear of the building. The rear door opened and, with the soft light that spilled forth, the man could be faintly seen carrying a bale of hay into the corral, dodging horses who tried to steal mouthfuls of hay before the man set the bale in a rack and cut the twine with his pocket knife. He then moved to an old-fashioned well pump, and began to jack the handle up and down. After ten minutes of this, the pumping stopped, and the man walked back into the barn. He soon re-emerged with a five gallon bucket full of what Max assumed was grain, and poured it in a line in a low trough. The grain seemed quite popular with the horses, as they shouldered one another out of the way to get to the trough.

This had been one of the many weak points in Max and Andy's plan. They had suspected that the Johnson's would not be around, but here was their son. His help could be invaluable, but if he was to be uncooperative, it could spell the doom of their plan. He didn't think he could contemplate shooting the man, and even hog-tying him could be a death sentence. Even as he watched the man set to his tasks, he strained his ears for the sound of rotor blades. They needed to get under cover. He didn't know if the forest canopy would be sufficient to hide them from the a helicopter's sensors, and if Andy had been captured, they needed to keep on the move.

Max made another "Ssst" and got the girls up. There was a three walled pole barn that the stables kept some of their hay in a hundred yards or so into the pasture. It was half empty of hay because of the Brown, and Andy figured it would be good enough concealment from the air. Max pulled a Russian "second generation" night vision monocular and put it to his non-dominant eye while squeezing the other shut. He pressed the switch to turn the scope on, and peered through the lens. He scanned quickly around the pasture, and although the image was poor without the supplemental infrared light, he saw nothing of a threatening nature. He took the scope from his eye and led the girls forward. They made their way quietly away from the main group of stable buildings, and when they had crossed far beyond the pole shed parallel to the road, they crossed the road and went over the board fence into the pasture. They made their way with caution to the pole shed. They climbed the dry bales to the center of the pile and, as quietly as they could, began to settle themselves in to wait.

Max didn't think much. He simply looked through the viewer at the barn and surrounding pasture. Aside from the figure in the barn and the horses, the grainy image showed nothing moved. The only way to increase the range of the old, obsolete night vision scope was to activate the infrared light source. While this

increased the range of the viewer, it also stood out like a sore thumb to anyone else with a night vision viewer. It was like using a flashlight in a field at night: sure, you could see better using the flashlight, but if anyone else was in the field, they could see you using the flashlight long before you could see them. Max didn't dare to use the illuminator.

The point of no return was fast approaching. If Andy didn't show soon, they would have to leave without him. He hated the thought of leaving Andy behind. Fingers of guilt gripped Max's hearth as he thought of the danger that Andy had faced while Max stayed behind "with the womenfolk." But Andy's arguments for this plan had been sound, and they had gotten this far.

Work the solution, not the problem, he told himself. One step at a time.

So far, the next step was a troublesome one. They needed the man in the barn to help them or to get out of the way. So far, they had lost nothing by waiting, but the time for action was rapidly approaching. The surveillance flights would be reaching this area soon. They needed to not be here. Max pulled the viewer from his eye and sank back behind the bales of hay, letting a sigh escape. He closed his eyes and rubbed them. He needed to make a decision. He checked his watch: It was time to go. He bent low to where Darcy and Lisa lay, watching outward from the small building. He whispered, "I'm going to talk to Willy. I know him a little. If he can help us, it'll make things a lot easier. We have to get going. We can't wait for Andy any longer."

Max imagined Darcy's face falling, showing despair, but she swallowed and whispered in agreement. "You keep an eye out for Andy and...anyone else. I'll be back soon."

Max handed the night scope to Lisa, and then crawled over the bales to the pasture below. He walked out of the pasture onto the road, and then walked down the driveway toward the barn. He stopped some yards away from the barn.

As he grew near, he said in a loud voice, "Hello, Willy. Are you home? It's Deputy Max Jeager, "

A silence ensued before Willy Johnson appeared in the doorway, holding a revolver low in his hand. He was a large man with a barrel chest and thickly muscled arms. His hair was going a little grey, though he was only in his early forties. Max knew him as a man who had a good reputation in town; A High School football star who decided to stay on the farm with his father and help to run things. Uneducated, but not dumb by any stretch. Mostly a quiet man, who had never married, though he dated often.

"Max? What do you want? What are you doing here?" He said.

Max walked forward into the dim lantern light, his AK-47 slung on his back. He made a strange sight, dressed in woodland camouflage and carrying such a wicked-looking rifle. Max put on a friendly, but serious face; his arms subtly out from his hips, palms empty and outward. Max had learned from his many law enforcement classes the strange but powerful effect of nonverbal communication, or “body language.” His posture was designed to show Willy that he was not a threat. He hoped this would offset the martial appearance that his clothing and weapon presented.

“I don’t have time to beat around the bush, Willy.” Max said. “I’m getting out of here. I think there’s more chance of getting killed staying under the “protection” of the quarantine than out there. They are going house to house and picking up people deemed threats to public safety, and I’m afraid that means me: I had a little difficulty following the orders of my superiors.”

“I know you Max. You’re a good man.” said Willy, holstering his revolver and motioning Max forward. “You enforce the spirit of the laws, not their letter. You use common sense while you take care of this community. If you think that’s the way it is, then I got to respect that. What do you want from me? How can I help?”

“I need horses. Three or four of them. Darcy, Lisa and Andy were coming along. Andy’s late, but we can’t wait any longer. We’re leaving anyway.”

“You ever ride horses before?”

“A few times. I was a Boy Scout.”

“How about the others?”

“They’ve ridden before, but I don’t know how much.”

“Well,” Said Willy, stroking the stubble that lay upon his chin, “I’m running out of feed for them all anyway. Don’t have time to exercise ‘em much either. You might’s well take ‘em, long as you’ll take care of ‘em.”

Max was struck by a sudden thought. “Willy, come with us. You’ll be a great help with the horses. You have a farmer’s skills and common sense.”

“There’s nothing for me out there. Everything I got is right here. Dad’s awful sick, and he needs me. The horses need me. And frankly Max, I don’t think that things are as bad here as you say. Sure, I hate the way we got a curfew, the way we can’t get in the car and drive to where we want. But I think they got our best interests at heart.”

“I think they got you fooled, Willy, but I respect your opinion. And I thank you for your help despite what you think.”

“Let’s get you set up.” said Willy.

Max stiffened: His earpiece had made two distinct crackles. Two more meant that it was Andy, and he was close. In the time it took to think about it, the earpiece made two more crackles. Andy was here, and he was safe. He knew the girls heard it too. A wide grin split his face, but Willy had already turned to get the horses ready. He trusted the girls would signal Andy, and indeed soon there was a whistle outside. The horses lifted their heads and twitched their ears. That, Willy noticed.

“Something’s going on.” Willy spoke.

“It’s Andy. He made it.” Said Max as he turned his ear toward Willy and tapped the radio earpiece.

“Good. You’ll need four horses then,” Willy replied as he turned back to the tack.

“Willy, I need to step out for a minute. I’ll be back with Andy to help.” Max said as he broke into a run toward the door.

“Sure.”

Max ran into the paddock, the long-suffering horses eyeing him with only mild interest as he ran by them to the pole shed where the girls and Andy waited. They had seen him drawing near with the night scope, and with no small disregard for light and sound discipline, had shouted “Andy, over here.”

The two friends met in the pasture before Andy could make it to where the girls were set up.

“Jesus, I thought they got you!” said Max, slapping Andy hard on the back.

“They still might. Any recon flights out here yet?” asked Andy. “Let’s get under cover.”

They walked quickly to the pole shed, with Andy telling of his mostly uneventful, but still nerve wracking trip on foot to the Johnson’s Stables. A brief and tearful reunion with Darcy was ended by Andy himself. “Look guys, we aren’t out of here yet. Let’s hold it together and stick with the plan. Is that Old Man Johnson in there?”

Max sobered quickly and told Andy of the elder Mr. Johnson’s condition and of Willy’s assistance but reluctance to accompany them. That was a relief in some ways: There were hardly supplies for the four of them at the retreat as it stood, much less throwing another person into the mix.

“Let’s get in there and help Willy. Gals, will you continue to keep watch out here? The hard part is still yet to come.” Said Andy softly, as he clapped his arm around Max’s shoulder and walked toward the stables.

Inside, Willy had led four horses into the stable and had begun saddling them. Max and Andy watched closely what Willy was doing, then grabbed the remaining two saddles laying there and began to saddle the horses. Willy finished his work, then murmured soft corrections to the two men as they worked. He began to tell them how to take care of the horses, what to do for them, and what never to do. Max and Andy listened intently, knowing that their lives could depend on these creatures and thus Willy’s instructions to care for them. As they were completing the task, and the time to leave grew close, Max brought the girls into the stable, and they began to load the horses with Willy’s help.

Finally, it was time to leave.

“Willy, I don’t know how to say ‘Thanks’ enough.” said Max, shaking hands with the man then pulling a box that was vacuum sealed in three bags from his backpack. “I hope this is a start. It’s .38 Special ammunition for your revolver. I wish it was .357 Magnum, but it’s all I have. It’s not much now, but if I’m right, you’re gonna need it before too long.”

“Max, I hope you’re wrong, but just in case, I’m going to put these little fellas someplace safe.” He said, shaking the box. His face sobered as he said, “Be careful, folks. You’d best be getting along.”

The four nodded and led the horses into the night. Max and Andy had not lightly chosen this means of escape. Though the horses were not as tractable as a car or a four wheeler, they were mostly self-healing, quiet, fuel was everywhere, and if times got tough, you could even eat ‘em. They also had another advantage that Max hoped they didn’t need: They were big thermal signatures. The patrol pilots would have gotten used to seeing the horses in the fields. Their large heat traces would not arouse suspicion. If the helicopters were not too close, the four could hide behind the horses and remain undetected during a cursory examination. If the FLIR equipped patrol got suspicious and flew close to investigate, well, it would be four AK-47s against a Blackhawk. Even the Somalians had had better odds. Max silently prayed that their luck would hold another hour.

AGreyMan

Pax Americana Chapter 55 – House Calls

Mark exhaled heavily and leaned on the handle of the maul. He removed his hat and wiped his brow with the back of his mitten. He had already removed his jacket, but until now his hands still were cold. The weather had turned viciously cold, and they were quickly going through the small stock of wood that was in the cabin. There were downed trees scattered throughout the area near the little hut, and Mark was busily converting them into pieces of burnable length for the stove.

Lazarus was still sleeping inside. They had arrived late yesterday evening, and he had been sleeping since then. The leg looked no worse, but not much better either. Mark had convinced him to swallow one of the erythromycin tablets, but it was too early to tell if it was helping or not. It was late morning now, and Mark had had to get out of the little cabin and look around before he started chopping wood. There were no other homes or farmhouses in sight. He had not wanted to awaken Lazarus to ask him how he knew of this place, but he suspected it was perhaps a hunting shack. A shed out back held a large metal tub and many small buckets, though they were covered with thick a layer of dust. It may have been a maple syrup rendering cabin at one time.

The cold wind began to bite again and Mark picked up the maul and resumed his attack on the logs. At the end of three hours, there was a respectable pile of wood to be stacked under the eaves of the cabin. Mark decided to take a short break, check on Lazarus and maybe find something to eat. He walked up to the cabin door and quietly opened it. Lazarus was still sleeping, taking deep, slow breaths. The blankets that covered him rose and fell in a reassuring pattern. Mark made a small grunt of satisfaction and turned to check the fire. It burned with sparse flame, giving off its life-giving heat as the wood burned down to coals. The cabin held the faint and comforting smell of wood smoke, and was lit through the small, grimy windows in the front of the cabin. Mark had found a small oil lamp and a jug of what smelled like to be kerosene. He lit the lamp last night with a brand from the fire, and the single lamp provided enough weak light to illuminate most of the cabin. He wanted to husband the kerosene as much as possible, so he kept it lit only long enough to prepare his bedroll.

Now he turned to the garbage bag that held the contents of his pack, and began to rummage through it, looking for some jerky or perhaps some of the fruit snacks that he was certain he had replaced since the last attack of his sweet tooth. He came across his tiny Motorola radio. A FRS/GMRS radio, it was small, compact, and used rechargeable AA batteries as a power source. Out of idle curiosity, he popped the ear bud into his ear, and set the unit to “scan.” He clipped the unit to his belt and resumed his search for food. Lazarus did not stir as Mark unwrapped a granola bar and bit into it. Mark stood and walked about the small cabin peering into corners and moving items on the sparse shelves. The large box beside the door held several small treasures. Mark was uncertain of both the

desperation of their current situation, and the condition of the cabins true owners. He had a small amount of food on hand, but it would not last longer than a week, especially if Lazarus' appetite returned. Mark put his coat, hat and mittens on and stepped out into the cold again.

He walked to the open shed where the huge blackened metal tub lay, and began to poke about. The room held some treasures, if he and Lazarus were forced to remain there. An old-fashioned pitcher pump hung from its handle on the wall. There were a several sections of pipe, and a "sand point" there as well. It looked as if someone had been preparing to sink a well at one time. His biggest find was several finely rusted traps. They hung from a nail on short pieces of chain. Mark didn't know a whole lot about traps, just what he'd read in "American Survival Guide" and from a few of the civilian survival tapes he watched. He had never even seen one in person, but he knew that it was a terrific find. Traps worked twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. They didn't care if it was cold, wet, raining or snowing. They stayed at their post and waited. They worked and worked and worked. Mark grabbed them off the wall and despite the fine scale of rust, they looked to be in decent condition. There was a small tag on one that read "Duke Connibear 110." Mark looked them over and tried to see how they worked.

He dropped the trap that he was holding onto his foot as he started when the ear bud suddenly squawked. "Team one to base."

Mark stood and pressed the ear bud tighter into his ear, straining to hear the exchange. "Base, go ahead."

"Looks all clear. I don't know where the smoke came from, but it's not here now." Mark glanced up at the chimney of the cabin. There was a faint, transparent wisp of white smoke rising from the chimney. Could they mean this smoke?

"10-4. Finish the sweep and return. FYI no military patrols in the area per scouts and LPs."

No military patrols? thought Mark. *So, at least these guys aren't military.*

"Roger. No other survivors noted this sweep. These ration packs are getting heavy!"

Mark didn't know what to think. Are these friends or foes? Should he try to contact them? Could they help even if they wanted to? They sounded organized and numerous. Any group like that had power. But once again, were they friendly? He wasn't sure he could risk contact, but he knew that Lazarus was bad off. Blood loss, exhaustion and possible infection were combining to spell possible doom for the boy. Mark pondered the previous conversation. "Ration packs" and "Survivors." It sounded like they were helping those who remained. That was too good to believe it was true. Lazarus had been shot. Mark had been

shot at, twice. Everyone was now suspect, but the possibility of help for Lazarus was a strong impetus to ask for help. Should he risk it?

The earbud crackled again: "Team One, check your comms. We have been in the clear: Switch to encryption!"

"Wait!" Shouted Mark into the mic before he could consciously make a decision. "Uhh, I have a boy here who has been shot. Do you have a medic?"

A long pause ensued. Mark hoped that he had made the correct snap decision.

"This is 'base.' Please identify yourself and a description of your needs."

"I have a fifteen or so year old boy, who has a gunshot wound to the left lower leg. I think he's lost some blood. I gave him two liters of saline but he's still not doing well. The wound doesn't look bad, and I cleaned it, but... I think he has a fever."

"Who shot him?"

"I don't know. I just found him."

"How many in your party?"

"There are just the two of us, and brother, it ain't no party."

"Roger that. I think we can have our medic take a look. I'll warn you, that any aggression or deception on your part may result in the use of force. Do you understand?"

"I understand."

"Where are you located?"

"Umm, I'm not exactly sure. Can I contact you in five minutes? I have to get my GPS"

"We'll stand by. What's your name?"

"Mark."

Mark ran into the cabin, and while rummaging hurriedly through his garbage bag, over his shoulder, he said, "Well Lazarus, I hope that your trust in me wasn't misplaced. I took a gamble, and if it pays off, it'll pay off big. If I lose, it could be the end of us."

Lazarus made no reply, and Mark found his GPS unit and went back outside. He

went back outside to the place he was standing when he first heard the voice on the radio.

“Mark to Base.” he intoned into the microphone.

“Go ahead, Mark. This is Base.” came the reply.

“OK, here are my coordinates.” Mark proceeded to list off the numbers that the GPS provided him.

“Stand by one, Mark.” came the voice, which seemed friendly enough.

“Standing by.”

“Mark, we can get our medic and team there in about four hours.”

“Fantastic. Is there anything I need to do?”

“Just don’t even think of harming the team.”

“No sir. I will not fire unless fired upon.”

“Fair enough, Mark.”

Thus began the longest four hours that Mark had ever experienced. He busied himself by insuring that the Glock was readily accessible in his holster. He hoped it wouldn’t come to that. He checked on Lazarus, who lay sleeping, though he had moved in his sleep and murmured some words that Mark could not make out. His fever did not seem to be worsening, and although he was hot, he was not extremely hot.

He also did his best to clean the tiny cabin, thinking that they –should they prove to be true to their word- may need some relatively clean space to work on Lazarus’ wound. He made certain the fire was properly stoked, and cleaned the globe on the oil lantern and lit it. He made a good-faith effort to clean the small windows that let in the milky daylight. He then paced the floor, looking out the window frequently. As the end of the wait grew near, Mark went outside to wait. It had begun to snow, and despite his anxiety, he marveled at the tiny flakes falling in slow motion from above.

Soon the sounds of footsteps came to him from several sides, as his eye caught multiple movements. There were at least three people coming out of the trees from three different directions. With a pounding heart, he held his hands out away from his sides. For their part, though the approaching people held rifles, they did not point them directly at Mark. The distance closed between them. Mark could see that one member of the party was a woman, and two were men. They all carried FN-FAL rifles and wore large camouflage backpacks. They each

had a small boom microphone in front of their lips, and a bulge in their stocking caps indicated the earpiece. The woman was young, looking about twenty or so. The men ranged in age from mid-twenties to late forties. The man in his late forties stepped forward. "Mark?"

"That's me." he said.

"My name is Dale. Is there anyone here beside you and the boy?" he asked.

"No. There's no one."

"Do you mind if we check the cabin?" Dale asked. It was a friendly tone, but his narrowed eyes made it plain that it was not a question.

"You may. There's no one but Lazarus –the wounded boy- in there."

"Does he know we are coming? "

"No, he's been sleeping a lot. I don't think he's unconscious, at least not completely."

"He sounds serious. Let's hurry this along. Please stand here with me while Kate and Luke check it out."

"Very well." said Mark.

Luke and Kate circled outside the cabin and each ducked under the windows as they passed. They reached the door, and got set. They nodded to each other and pushed the door open rapidly. They rushed into the cabin in a crouch, and disappeared into the gloom. Seconds later Kate emerged and made the "OK" sign with her thumb and forefinger.

Dale touched the push-to-talk switch on his radio. "John?"

Mark heard the earpiece crackle.

"Good." said Dale. "Can you stay out for a while? If you get too cold, call in and we'll relieve you. Mark's cabin looks nice and warm." He looked at Mark and gave a merry wink. "Let's get to your boy."

As they entered the cabin, Luke was opening his pack that he had set on the table. He withdrew a small pack and set it on the table. Kate opened her pack and did the same thing. Dale leaned his FAL against the wall and opened his pack as well, pulling out his smaller pack and opening it up, withdrawing a few items. He walked over and pulled a chair up by the bed. He looked at Mark. "What did you say his name was?" Dale asked.

“He told me his name was ‘Lazarus.’” replied Mark.

“Let’s hope so, Mark.” he said as he turned to Lazarus.

“Lazarus. Lazarus!” He called. The boy groaned and rolled over. His eyes opened a little, then suddenly widened as he saw the others in the room. His eyes met Mark’s.

“It’s OK, Lazarus. They’re here to help.” said Mark.

Lazarus relaxed a little then looked at Dale. Dale smiled down at him and spoke in a soft, reassuring voice.

“How are you doing, partner?”

“My leg hurts.”

“I bet it does! Can I have a look?”

Lazarus made no reply, but moved to uncover his leg.

“Hang on, pal. I’ll do it for you. You just relax.” said Dale.

Dale gently removed the blanket and began to unwrap the bandages that swathed the leg. He pulled a small flashlight from the little pack and played it on both sides of the wound. It didn’t look terribly bad to Marks eyes. He prodded a little here and there, and checked the pulse in his foot. He felt the toes and blanched the toe nail beds.

Dale looked at Lazarus and Mark. “Well, the good news is that it doesn’t need to come off.” He said with a grin. Lazarus smiled back at him. “The bad news” He continued, “Is that the wound needs to be cleaned out, and you need antibiotics.”

“I had some erythromycin tablets that I gave him. I don’t know if they cover the right germs or not.” said Mark.

“They aren’t the best, but they’re better than nothing. How many has he had?” asked Dale

“Just two tablets. Plus a little Tylenol. Last time I gave him some was this morning at about six.”

“Good. OK, let’s get set. Lazarus, we need to get these pants off you. I’m sure Kate will turn around and not peek. Then I’m going to numb you up and clean up that hole in your hide.”

Kate did indeed turn around while Dale and Mark helped him take off the pants. Then Dale withdrew a small headlamp from the kit and placed it on his forehead. Its multiple white LEDs gave off a surprising amount of light. Dale next pulled several towels from some wrappings and placed them under Lazarus' leg. As he worked, he glanced at Mark. "So, you gave him two liters? Are you an EMT or something?"

"No, I was a Combat Lifesaver in the Army Reserves."

"How long were you in the Reserves?"

"I was active duty Marines for a few years, and I've been in the Reserves for a couple years."

"What did you do in the Marines?"

"Sir, all Marines are riflemen!"

"I know that, son." Dale said with a grin. "I meant what was your assigned duty."

"Infantry, sir."

"Good outfit, the Marines."

"Yes, sir. The best."

"I imagine the Navy will contest that, Mark."

"They did a few times sir, but most of the swabbies came around to our way of thinking after a few run-ins."

"I expect they might."

Mark said nothing, but smiled.

"Kate, can you get a set of vitals for me?" Dale asked, glancing her way, "Then spike and prime a bag for me, please? Thanks."

"Sure." She replied, leaning her FAL against the wall next to Dale's, then proceeded to retrieve the BP cuff, stethoscope, and thermometer from a bag that someone –Mark lost track of who- had pulled from their pack. She smiled at Lazarus and put the cuff around his arm and proceeded to get his blood pressure, temperature and pulse rate. Dale started setting up some of his equipment, and Kate reported the findings: "BP is one oh two over fifty-eight. Pulse is one thirty. 'Rs' are 22, and temp is only 99.4."

“Not bad, Mr. Lazarus, not too bad at all. I was expecting worse. At first blush, at least, it looks like mostly blood loss, and not infection. But I think that’s a matter of time. If we let that leg go much longer, it’s going to get bad. You may get the bacteria from the infected wound into the bloodstream. That would most probably kill you. So…” He looked up at Lazarus earnestly, “I need to open up that wound a little and clean out all of the dead tissue. That gives the bacteria no place to hide. Plus I am going to remove any bits of leaves, rock and dirt that may be a source of germs. Then I’m going to wash the heck out of that wound to get every last bit of junk out of there. Then I’m going to put a bandage on there with some drains coming out. That will let any fluids that accumulate an easy way out, and won’t interfere with healing. Now, I am going to numb that whole lower leg. It’ll hurt a little when I do it, but then you won’t feel a thing. OK?”

Lazarus looked at Mark, who nodded. “Very well.” was Lazarus’ only reply.

“Good. Now I am going to start an IV line on you. I am not going to replace the blood you lost, just the fluid, understand? I’m not adding any cells that carry oxygen or fight infection. I am just replacing the water part of your blood. It’ll make you feel a little better. Plus, I can give you some antibiotics right into your bloodstream. That WILL kill germs. Any questions?”

“Yes. I have two questions. The first is, how long will it be before I am healed?”

“You may never be exactly like you were. But if everything goes well, you should be back to normal in a few weeks. What’s the other question?” asked Dale.

“What does it cost?” Lazarus’ eyes bore into Dale’s.

“For right now, nothing. We formed our group to help others. Someday, we may ask a favor of you. Maybe tomorrow, maybe never. You are obligated to perform the favor. Do you accept these conditions?”

“I do.”

“Good. You seem a fine lad: I’d hate to lose you.” With that, Dale started the IV line in Lazarus’ arm. He was smooth and quick, and although the needle was large, Lazarus felt minimum discomfort.

“I’m going to give you something to relax you. It won’t render you unconscious, but it might make you sleepy.”

Dale squirted a fluid into the IV line and Lazarus felt his eyes get heavy. Dale then withdrew a syringe from his kit and filled it with a clear liquid from a separate, larger bottle.

“I am going to numb your lower leg now, Lazarus. I need to get this numbing medication to the nerves that run to that part of your leg. I need you to roll over,

or at least get onto your side. The nerves are in the back part or the leg, behind the knee.” Dale said, laying a hand on his patient’s shoulder.

Lazarus nodded and rolled onto his stomach.

He painted the back of Lazarus’ leg with a brownish liquid after cleaning it with regular water from his canteen and a clean cloth. Dale attached a needle that was about two and a half inches long and very thin to the syringe.

“This is going to hurt for a little while –probably no more than sixty seconds. Then your leg pain will be gone. Are you ready?”

The boy nodded again into the pillow. Dale plunged the needle into the back of Lazarus’ leg, and began injecting the liquid, moving the needle, injecting a little more, moving the needle, and injecting a little more. At first Lazarus seemed tense, then after nearly a minute, he relaxed noticeably.

“Better?” asked Dale.

Lazarus again nodded.

“Does this hurt?” asked Dale, as he prodded the wound with a gloved finger.

“No.”

“How about this?” as he poked the other side of the wound.

“No.”

“Great! Let’s get started. Kate, glove up and help me, can you?” said Dale as he pulled on a pair of gloves. He draped some towels over the leg and set to work.

Over the next hour or so, Dale and Kate opened the wound and used instruments to cut away dead tissue. They irrigated the wound with a syringe and some water from a canteen marked “sterile.” Finally they placed a small drain in each side of the wound. They placed some bandaging loosely covering the wounds, and then wrapped it with some gauze bandage. Lazarus had actually fallen asleep again.

“OK, I think that does it. No guarantees, but considering that all the nearest hospitals have burned down and the roads aren’t safe.... Anyway, I’ll give him a dose of antibiotics through the IV before we go. Mark, do you feel comfortable watching that IV? He’s going to need a couple more doses of antibiotics through the IV, then go on oral antibiotics. Hey Kate, how about another set of vitals, please?”

Kate set to her task.

“Show me once, and I can do it. But I’m out of normal saline.”

“We’ve got you covered.”

“I don’t know how to thank you. You probably saved his life.”

“Maybe. Maybe not. He’s not out of the woods yet, but I think he’ll be OK. We will be back in a few days to check on him. I’ll leave bandaging supplies and the antibiotics. If anything changes, you can get a hold of us the same way you did initially.”

Mark had thousands of questions for him now that Lazarus was cared for.

“Where did you guys come from? What’s happening out there?”

“We are a group of friends who believe in self-reliance. Some –like me- believe as a hobby, some –like John, who you have not met- believe as a part of their religion. Some believe as a matter of political principle. Whatever our reasons, it’s paying off now. As to why we are out here, giving away supplies and skills? Well, we think of it as an investment. We help our neighbors, so our neighbors will want to help us, should the need arise.”

“Lazarus and I are in your debt.” said Mark.

“That’s the best kind of debt: A debt of honor. It means that we will have men of honor eager to fulfill that debt in time of need. As for what’s going on out there, well, it’s getting ugly. Troops have been called out, and there is fighting going on. Cities are burning. The Brown has killed off most of the crops, which is OK, because the Plague has killed off a good chunk of the people. Some places worse than others. People are so scared they’re making their own problems. Riots, stuff like that. People are afraid to go to work, so things don’t get done, so people get mad, so they riot and steal and such, and the whole thing gets worse and worse.”

“What am I going to do? I am halfway from my house to my Mom’s house.” asked Mark, soberly.

“I dunno, Mark. I wouldn’t try to travel, at least on the roads.”

“I got a hard lesson in that already.” Mark proceeded to tell Dale all that had transpired since leaving his apartment. “Lazarus hasn’t been able to tell me what’s happened to him. Something happened to him, not just the gunshot wound. He’s, well, spooky sometimes. I don’t doubt he is a good kid, and he saved my life once already, but....”

“Just be a friend to him. That’s what he needs, whether the antibiotics work or not.”

“Yeah.”

“I would like to invite you to our place, but I can’t, for several reasons. I’ll talk to the others, though. Maybe some kind of arrangement can be worked out. Until then, though, we have a couple ration packs to leave with you. We are supposed to give out one per person, but I think we can spare a little extra. It’s not a whole lot, but it’s better than nothing...Probably better than you have. Couple pounds of dried beans, couple pounds of rice, some vitamin tablets, hard candy, some bullion, stuff like that.”

“I just can’t thank you enough. Everything you have done...I just can’t thank you enough!” said Mark. The generosity of his visitor was nearly overwhelming. After days of being shot at, killing at least three men, being cold and worrying about Lazarus, the safety that he found –even if temporary- was a grand relief. The flood of emotion that he had needed to contain threatened to wash over him. He turned from Dale for a moment and blinked back the tears that welled in his eyes. He turned back to Dale.

“Whenever you need a favor, please let me know. I’ll monitor the same frequency we met on at ten AM and four PM. I am guessing you have the power to monitor continuously?” Mark asked.

“Yes, but whether we can or will answer is another question altogether. We aren’t the sheriffs. We aren’t the Welfare Agency. We do what we can, but don’t be too disappointed if we are unable or unwilling to help. The little bit that I have talked with you, you seem like a good young man. The fact that you have taken Lazarus in and defended him with your life speaks well of you. You have military experience, and your equipment shows that you are also a practitioner of self-reliance. There may be room for you with us. I don’t know and I can’t say yet. We’ll have to wait and see.” Dale spoke as he packed his supplies. Kate and the other man did likewise.

They put on their packs and headed toward the door. Dale turned and extended his hand to Mark.

“Nice to have met you and Lazarus. Like I said, I’ll be back to check on him in a few days. I may have some news for you then, I may not.” said Dale, his breath making plumes of white in the cold. “Take care.”

Kate smiled at him and Luke waved as the trio turned to walk away into the gathering gloom.

Pax Americana Chapter 56 – Left Behind

**“Panic sweeps my men when they are facing the American Marines.”
*A captured North Korean Major***

**“There is only one tactical principle which is not subject to change. It is to use the means at hand to inflict the maximum amount of wound, death, and destruction on the enemy in the minimum amount of time.”
*General George S. Patton, Jr.***

**“Marines are about the most peculiar breed of human beings I have ever witnessed. They treat their service as if it was some kind of cult, plastering their emblem on almost everything they own, making themselves up to look like insane fanatics with haircuts to ungentlemanly lengths, worshipping their Commandant almost as if he was a god, and making weird animal noises like a band of savages. They'll fight like rabid dogs at the drop of a hat just for the sake of a little action, and are the cockiest SOB's I have ever known. Most have the foulest mouths and drink well beyond man's normal limits, but their high spirits and sense of brotherhood set them apart and, generally speaking, of the United States Marines I've come in contact with, are the most professional soldiers and the finest men I have had the pleasure to meet.”
*An Anonymous Canadian Citizen***

Zipper listened intently to the static on the headset. Something was wrong, incredibly wrong but he couldn't put his finger on just what was spinning around in the back of his mind. His team had been in the bush for the past three weeks working with local troops chasing Muslim guerrillas in and out of the triple canopy jungle and across ridgeline after ridgeline after ridgeline.

“Well?” Staff Sergeant Larkin asked his FCT (Fire Control Team, pronounced as “FICT”) team radioman.

The wiry radioman looked up puzzled at his team leader. “Still nothing on the airways.”

“Damn.”

“No you don't understand Staff Sergeant. THERE'S NOTHING ON THE AIRWAYS!”

“I got that Zip, nothing on the airways.”

Lance Corporal Zimmerman pulled off the headset and stood up, drew himself closer to his SSgt and lowered his voice. “Trev....there's nothing, nadda, zip!

There is never absolutely nothing floating through the air. I've spun the dial, I can't pick up anyone....ANYWHERE!"

"Are you trying to tell me that no body is talking anywhere?" The big staff sergeant looked around thinking. "We've got an entire battle group out there, a carrier, amphibs, half the Philippine army is out in the field on this one. How can we be picking up nothing?"

"That's what I've been trying to tell you. There ain't anyone talking anywhere!"

"Are you sure your radio hasn't crapped out?"

"Staff Sergeant I've gone over every inch of this thing. It's working perfectly only...." He paused. "I've even switched the crystals. I've tried every combination of military frequencies we have open to us. I can't pick up anything."

"So what does that mean."

"Either we're in a total radio blackout, which I doubt for an operation of this size, or the fleet is just not there."

SSgt Larkin just stood there angry and confused. Something was not adding up. Three days ago they had missed receiving their scheduled supply drop. That in and of it self was not all that unusual, rear echelon poguees often screwed up such things. After all, it was no concern of theirs whether or not a half a dozen or so grunts stuck in the middle of a friggin' jungle got their ration of MREs and potable water, so long as those same limp dicks received their nightly ration of ice cream. But something was seriously not adding up.

His FCT team had been working with U.S. Army Rangers during the first leg of this sweep. Through out the operation there had been problems coordinating the massive anti-terrorist effort with the local indigenous troops. To remedy that glitch his Marine Fire Control Team had been dropped in to provide liaison between Philippine Army and Marines, U.S. Ranger elements, Navy fire support, as well as both U.S. and Philippine air strike units.

They had been in the field for three weeks, bouncing between different units as the combined U.S. and Philippine troops fought a running gun battle with the terrorist guerrillas. It had been a slow going, cat and mouse game slogging though the dense jungle and scattered villages, but they had been making some progress. Then a week ago the ANGLICO FCT team had stepped off to link up with yet another indigenous unit. After two days of coordinating naval gunfire and air support there, they took off again to team up with still another unit and then somehow missed their rendezvous. Larkin's seven man team had been at the right place at the right time, but nobody showed. The day before yesterday around noon they suddenly lost all radio contact. That had not really concerned

him at first, but the continued vacuum that he found himself in was beginning to initiate a warning bell deep inside the hard core professional young Marine. For the last forty-eight hours they had had no contact with the outside world. They had seen no one, heard no one, and could contact no one. Staff Sergeant Larking did not like this, not at all.

“Sergeant Stevens, on me.” The Staff Sergeant called.

His stocky 249-gunner quick stepped up to the top of the hill where his team leader and radioman were.

“Yes, Staff Sergeant.”

“Get everyone packed up and ready to roll in one-five mikes.”

“Aye-Aye. Any idea where the little fuckers are?”

“We’ll discuss that when everyone is ready. Get going, Sergeant.”

Fifteen minutes later with his team assembled SSgt Larkin broke the news to them.

“Alright, gents, gather ‘round.” He said as he laid out the map. “We’re here....this is where our units were two days ago, but Zipper hasn’t been able to raise anyone since then.”

“Did ja break yer fricken toy Zip?”

“It’s not fuckin’ broken, smartass!”

“Knock it off, this is serious shit!” Larkin barked.

“Staff Sergeant, what is going on?” Doc Nabors, the team’s Navy Corpsman, asked seriously.

“I don’t know, Doc.” He answered looking around the group. “Something’s wrong and we’re getting the hell out of here.”

“But the mission?” PFC Daniels asked.

Zipper jumped in. “There ain’t no fucking mission, man. We’re out here on our lonesome with our asses hanging out in the wind.”

“CAN IT ASSHOLES!” Larkin was now getting pissed. He felt like he knew these men like brothers, but his patience was wearing thin. Alarm bells were going off in the back of his mind and he wanted to get moving.”

“Look Marines...and Doc.” Someone slapped the Corpsman on the shoulder. “I’ve got a bad feeling about this situation. Something is just not right.” He paused to let that sink in.

“So we’re headed back to forward command as quick as we can. If we link up with friendly units on the way, so much the better.” Heads were nodding back at him. “But remember that we’re deep in Indian country.”

All heads suddenly turned to Lance Corporal Yahzee, a Navaho of the Folding Arms People from the Towering House Clan.

“No offense, Tony.”

“None taken, Staff Sergeant. These gooks would shoot me just as quick as anyone else here.” He paused. “If they could see me that is.”

The group chuckled. Lance Corporal Anthony “Tony” Yahzee had been raised in the old ways deep within tribal lands and was the best tracker and bush bunny Larkin had ever seen. If Yahzee didn’t want you to see him...then you didn’t see him. At times it could be very spooky to suddenly have him materialize out of the bush right in front of your face. That and when Yahzee was walking point absolutely nothing escaped his gaze. The joke was that he could track a gnat’s ass walking across a sheet of glass. Larkin had tried to get his quiet Navaho to teach his tricks of the trade to the rest of the team, but try as he might, Yahzee would just throw up his hands in disgust.

“You whites are blind!” He would shout in frustration as he walked away to disappear into the foliage.

A comment that didn’t go down well with Lance Corporal Ernesto Caesar Chavez, but then Caesar had never been away from black top and street lights until he left the Los Angeles barrio and joined the Corps. In the bush he was just as blind as the “Anglo’s” that so frustrated their “token Indian”.

With practiced precision, the team took up their assigned positions and began the long march out. They covered ten hard going kilometers that first day. Skirting the scattered villages and ever on the outlook for both friendlies and “Indians.” Two days later, exhausted and nearly out of rations and water, the group finally pulled into the area that had been the primary outpost base camp for the operation. It was empty!

Yahzee reported back after nearly an hour of observing the vacant camp up close and personal.

“Anything?” SSgt Larkin asked.

“Nada skipper! Those doggies pulled out lock stock and barrel. Left some tentage, found a pallet of rations, some empty jerry cans and a lot of trash, but there’s no sign of anyone. They’ve been gone for....about a week from what I can guess. But there’s something odd, Staff Sergeant.”

“What’s that?”

“Just all the stuff they left behind is still there.”

“So.”

“Have you ever known locals NOT to strip our trash clean? I mean nobody’s been here for a week. That is weird. Isn’t there a village just a few clicks east of here?”

“Yeah....you’re right Yahzee, that is really weird.” The Marine pondered for a moment. “Let’s go check out the village and see if we can get some answers.”

Less than an hour later they had just topped the ridge when they heard the sound of gunfire off to the north.

Larkin turned to his radioman, who just shook his head. With quick hand signals the seven man team immediately went into alert mode and began moving in the direction of the firefight taking place just up the valley from them. Whatever was going on seemed to be extremely one sided and was moving towards them, quickly.

The big Marine suddenly signaled for the team to freeze and gave the hand signal for a hasty ambush. As if operating from a single mind the seven members quickly and silently moved into position and waited. Something or someone was running hard towards them with a lot of something’s or someone’s hard on their heels. The running exchange of gunfire soon gave Larkin a hint to the players in the rapidly developing drama. Someone with a pistol was returning sporadic fire against a larger group armed with assault rifles.

“Psst, pass the word. Nobody fires until I open up.” Larkin whispered.

Quickly, the word went down the line. Just then Larkin caught a glimpse, a flash of blond hair bouncing through the underbrush. *American?* he thought, just before she emerged from the tree line, paused to look back and then turned to dash across the shallow stream between the hidden Marines and her pursuers. The rustle of brush was not fifty yards behind the fleeing blond. She crossed the stream and started up the far bank when the first pursuer cleared the tree line and brought up his weapon on the fleeing woman.

“M-A-R-I-N-E-S! Larkin bellowed and opened up as more Muslim guerrillas suddenly popped out of the tree line. The M-4 bucked against his shoulder and his SS-109 rounds ripped across the short distance meeting flesh with a sickening “THWAP – THWAP – THWAP!”.

Exposed and unable to curb their forward momentum the first wave of guerrillas suddenly found themselves trapped between the firestorm ragging to their front and their comrade’s blind pursuit from behind pushing them into the open killing ground.

BOOM –cha-shink - BOOM! – cha-shink - BOOM!.. blasted off to Larkin’s right as their Doc added to the Marine firepower, emptying his pump shotgun as quickly as he could. Screams erupted from the other side of the stream and suddenly the Staff Sergeant realized that his Corpsman’s shotgun was loaded up with flechette rounds and was shredding the jungle as well as the pursuing terrorists with the tiny steel darts.

“BLOOP - BLOOP.....BOOOOM - BOOOOM!” filled the air as two members of his FCT team cut loose with 40mm grenades at point blank range. The rip of Steven’s 249 erupted from the far right flank. The guerrilla’s were now caught in a deadly crossfire of death, the trap door was beginning to close in on them and they fought desperately to escape. Several of the frantic pursuers actually attempted to break the ambush in classic textbook fashion by assaulting the center of the line. They raced forward firing blindly screaming at the top of their lungs until their air was cut viciously short. Just as they reached the far bank of the stream and started up the small slope two horrendous explosions launched hundreds of tiny steel pellets at near supersonic velocities tearing through their soft flesh.

Larkin grinned as he realized that their newest recruit, PFC Daniels, had had the foresight to place two claymore antipersonnel mines in front of his position. The five terrorists disappeared in the blast that cleared a path of death and destruction back across the killing ground. The stream was now filled with their fragments as it became saturated with their blood.

The Marines pressed on their attack with deadly professionalism. Empty magazines fell onto the jungle floor as fresh mags were slapped in their place. With trained precision, precise fire control and deadly accuracy, very few rounds missed their marks. As each new terrorist appeared they were met with at least two burning rounds at chest height. None escaped the onslaught.

The jungle was filled with more explosions as grenades shattered bone and ripped apart flesh. A herd of angry flaming bees zipped through the air searching for soft flesh. Time jerked about them as they engaged fully in the blood lust of the moment. Then suddenly the jungle fell silent. The sound of battle echoed through the forest and the minds of the living and as the Marines ceased their

deadly fire and the stillness of the moment crashed in upon them.

Larkin looked around partially stunned. It had only lasted a moment but it had been a very intense moment. The silence was suddenly broken with the call: "Corpsman UP!" meaning only one thing, a Marine was down.

The Staff Sergeant kept his eyes towards the enemy and quickly moved towards the call yelling as he did. "Flankers out! Get eyes on target!"

Two Marines, Yahzee and Zipper, dashed back across the stream and disappeared into the bush. Larkin arrived to see his Doc hovering over one of his team members lying on the ground. There was no sound coming from the down Marine and he didn't like the implication of that. Doc rocked back on his heels and looked up at his team leader. He didn't need to say anything. Larkin knew what that meant and then caught a glimpse of the dead Marine. He had been hit several times, but the wound to his head had finished him off for sure. PFC Daniels had been the newest and youngest member assigned to SSgt Larkin's team. From the flatlands of Kansas originally, he had worked hard to become a part of the team.

"SHIT!" Sgt Stevens exclaimed as he ran up, the barrel of his M-249 still smoking from the firefight.

"So where is the bitch that started all this shit....man!" LCpl Chavez snarled.

"THE BITCH IS RIGHT BEHIND YOU MARINE!"

Every head turned to see where that came from. Standing just ten feet from them still with her Beretta in hand stood an exhausted Army Ranger. She walked over and looked down at the dead Marine for several seconds before saying anything else.

"My entire medical team was attacked last night..." Her voice trailed off.

"So where are the others?" Chavez asked.

"There are no others." She answered in a dead tone.

"Chavez, you can be such a fuckhead!" Sgt Stevens growled at him.

"Who's in charge here?" She asked looking around.

"The Staff Sergeant." Chavez pointed.

"Staff Sergeant?" She turned to face Larkin.

He stepped forward and put out his hand. "Staff Sergeant Trevor Larkin, 1st ANGLICO, USMC."

She grasped his firm handshake and returned it equally. "Staff Sergeant Katherine Stacy, Medical Specialist, Army Rangers." There was an odd silence. "Call me Cat or Doc, either will do."

"Roger Staff Sergeant Stacy." Larkin replied. "Now can you tell just what the fuck is going on here?"

Just then a shot rang out off in the direction that Yahzee and Zipper had taken, then another.

Sgt Stevens looked up; he had been listening in on the squad radio. "Clean up, Staff Sergeant...they're headed back. We're secure for now."

Larkin nodded. "Get 'em back and let's put some distance between us and this place." Turning back to the Army Staff Sergeant. "Can you roll?"

"Marine I have no intention of sticking around here any longer than I absolutely have too. I'll make it!"

Larkin turned back to his team and nodded down to Daniels. "Strip him of all essentials, weapon and 782 gear to the Staff Sergeant and Stevens you and Chavez rig a single pole litter and bring Daniels."

"You're going to carry a dead man out of here?" Stacy seriously asked Larkin.

With an angry look on his face Larkin answered her. "Marines don't leave Marines behind."

"He's dead."

"Dead or alive, it doesn't matter. We all go home!"

They spent the rest of the day silently as the group slowly worked their way back through the jungle to the abandoned base camp. Just as evening was starting to descend they reentered the camp. His team was beat. They were low on food, water, ammunition and now a man short. Larkin didn't hold the Ranger responsible for Daniels loss. That kind of shit happens in combat. What bothered him the most was not knowing what the hell was going on around him. This area had been totally secure. The guerrillas had been chased out for some time. What had caused the Rangers to leave in such a hurry? Where was the fleet? Where was their air support? Where the hell was everyone?

That night they buried Private First Class Daniels, United States Marine Corps in

the center of the base camp and pulled an Air Force aluminum pallet over the top of his grave to protect it. Zipper took down the GPS coordinates and the team retreated back into the jungle.

The next morning Larkin assembled his team.

“All right gents...lady. Here’s the situation as I see it. As far as we can tell we’re on our own. SSgt Stacy here has informed me that her group lost Com’s about the same day as we did. They were out performing some Civ-Hum (Civilian Humanitarian) duties way out in the sticks when things got squirrely. On the way back they ran smack dab into those guerrilla’s we spanked. She was the only one of her team to survive.”

For better than an hour the group discussed their options. They performed a quick inventory of just what they had, rearranged loads and made preparation for the next day. By general consensus they all agreed that their best option at the moment lay in making their way to the coast and trying to hook up with any friendly forces they could locate there. The area they were now in was Indian country or would soon be again. That meant that they had several days of hard travel ahead of them. Travel through unfamiliar territory with potential hostiles in every corner.

As the rest of the group made their final preparations before stepping off Larkin looked out at the jungle and muttered under his breath. “Just what the fuck is going on? And where the hell is everyone?”

A hundred different scenarios ran through his mind and ninety-nine percent of them were bad.

Desert Doc

Chapter 57 – Retribution

If you can find a path with no obstacles, it probably doesn't lead anywhere.
Frank A. Clark

"Our sense of revenge is as exact as our mathematical faculty, and until both terms of the equations are satisfied we can not get over the sense of something left undone."

Inazo Nitobe, Bushido

"Now I recall the Recon Marines, ragged, filthy cammie shirted young men in green paint who move silent like the fog with deadly purpose in their eyes. Swift, Silent, Deadly. I smile."

GYSGT Correll, USMC, Retired-- Recon Marine

Yahzee had been on point for the better part of the morning. Slowly and meticulously working his way through the unfamiliar territory, leading his fellow Marines and the Army Ranger Medic to the ocean and hopefully back to friendly forces. His eyes darted left and right like the tongue of a snake – he missed nothing. He had seen old sign left behind by several local patrols but nothing fresh. It was nearly noon above the triple canopy umbrella while on the forest floor below they walked in a perpetual primal twilight, when the Navaho suddenly froze. The entire team immediately followed suit and looked to their flank. SSgt Larkin cautiously moved forward his eyes trying to peer through the thick green wall that surrounded them. Every member of his team was coiled ready to strike.

When he reached Yahzee he followed his gaze and could see that he was pointing at a boot print on the jungle floor.

In a whisper that was barely audible just inches away his point man explained.

"See the broken lug." referring to the footprint that was different from the others.

Larkin nodded.

"Same sign yesterday at ambush, but got away." Yahzee pointed to the mish-mash of footprints on the narrow trail that lay in front of them.

"That one there...and over there are carrying a heavy load, maybe carrying someone." He paused and pointed to still more sign.

"There and there, not local, GI issue boots like the Ranger is wearing. See the

scuff there...someone being half carried or dragged.” He pinched some dark soil between his fingers and sniffed it. “Blood, pretty fresh...someone’s bleeding, not much but steady by the looks of it.” He pointed down the trail.

“What do you think this means?”

“Well...I’m just a dumb injin, boss, but my guess is that we’ve got a group of locals moving fast, eight...maybe ten...with wounded... and prisoners...maybe.” Yazhee held up his other hand and displayed a single strand of long medium brown hair. “This ain’t local.”

“Any of them nearby?” Larkin asked.

Yazhee raised his head, snorted and sniffed the air and slowly shook his head.

“Don’t tell me you can smell them?” The Staff Sergeant asked in amazement.

“No Staff Sergeant, just clearing my nose.” He gave his team leader a ‘maybe I can’ smile. “They passed this way in the last couple of hours, but I don’t think this trail is used very much...from the look of it. At least since the last rain.”

Staff Sergeant Larkin pondered the possibilities for a few seconds. Maybe the Ranger was wrong and there had been survivors. He turned to his point man.

“Okay, Cochise, recon that trail and see what you can get from it. We’ll be 100 meters back off the trail from here. You’ve got one hour.”

“Cochise was a Chiracahua Apache, kemo sabe, not Navaho. He would need two hours. I will be back in less.”

Yazhee slipped off his large Alice ruck and stripped down to just his minimal survival/combat gear and then disappeared down the trail into the jungle.

The team moved back the way they had come and then off into virgin jungle where they made a hasty camp and rested, waiting for Yazhee to return.

“What’s going on?” SSgt Stacy asked Larkin.

“Yazhee spotted some unfinished business and is checking it out.” He answered flatly.

“So we just wait here?”

Larkin leaned back against his pack and pulled down his bush hat to cover his eyes.

“Yes.” was all he said before he drifted off to sleep.

Buck stuck his head into the machine shop and yelled over the racket made by the buffing wheel. Kevin shut off the machine, laid down the partially finished FN receiver and turned to his son lifting off his hearing protection as he did.

“Dad, Mr. Richardson waits you to come in to the radio room pronto!”

The healing process had been slow going for the old man. But thanks to his stubborn constitution and Stephanie’s careful nursing he was finally able to get out bed and move around. Not a person to lay about licking his wounds, he quickly joined in where ever he could. Still weak and unable to stand for long periods of time he spent a lot of his time in his radio room monitoring his shortwave equipment. Lately Buck had taken an interest and Richardson was more than happy to pass along the vast knowledge on the subject. Buck was like a sponge and working with the old man to build and modify new equipment to improve their capabilities. Kevin joined the pair as Mr. Richardson flicked the speakers on so everyone could hear.

“What’s up?” Kevin asked, wiping his hands on a shop towel.

“Buck and I have been monitoring some of the overseas radio stations over the past couple of days and there seems to be some surprising events taking place.”

Kevin pulled up a chair and sat there listening to the garbled voices trying to break through the static on the speaker.

Richardson turned to Kevin. ‘Seems that we had a rather large contingent of forces over in the Philippines chasing Muslim Gorillas around some island there.’

“Yeah, I remember something about that back when we still had regular news coming in. We’ve got folks spread all over the place across the globe chasing down Al Qaida. So?”

“Well, from the sound of it, they’ve suddenly pulled out and are headed home.”

“Home?”

“Home...as in back to the States.”

“Do we know that for sure? Are you getting military frequencies on that thing?”

“No way, Pop, those channels are all encrypted. But we are getting some talk between local hams and some civilian ships at sea. It’s not only our military but

ALL US FLAGGED ships are being ordered home.”

Kevin thought about that for a few seconds. “Ordered home? What do you suppose that means, Frank?”

The old man turned slowly in his chair and looked at Kevin. “I don’t know, son, but I don’t like the sound of it.”

“Neither do I.” Kevin slowly got up and put back his chair. “Keep listening and see what you can come up with. It’s been too quiet around these parts for the last couple of months. If the President is pulling back all our overseas military forces then he may be planning something to deal with little renegade areas like ours.”

“You don’t think he’s planning on sending in our own military....here....do you?” Buck asked his father.

“The resistance is getting stronger and stronger every day. We’re just one small part of it Buck.”

“But if he’d only just let us be, we’d be fine. Everything would go back to normal...soon.”

“Son.” Kevin reached out and placed his big hand on his son’s shoulder. “Nothing is ever going to be the same. We already crossed that bridge and there is no going back.”

Buck gave his father a troubled look. ‘But....’

Mr. Richardson slowly spun his chair around to face the pair. “Your father is right young man. We’ve crossed the Rubicon when we stood up for our rights as free Americans under the Constitution. We can’t back down now...we’ll have to ride this horse to the end of the race and hope to hell he doesn’t throw a shoe in the process.”

The squad radio in SSgt Larkin’s ears keyed twice, two long – two short. Larkin immediately opened his eyes and keyed the response. Yazhee was coming in. A few minutes later he melted out of the foliage and squatted down beside his team leader.

“Did you find anything?” Larkin asked looking at his watch. It had been over three hours since he had sent the Navaho off to recon the trail.

The camouflaged Native American held out his hand and dropped three dog tags onto the ground in front of him. Three bloody dog tags. SSgt Katherine Stacy

slowly reached out her hand and picked the first one up. With her thumb she rubbed off the dirt and congealed blood and read the name on it. Suddenly she gasped for breath and began to sob. She picked up the other two tags and rubbed them until she could read the names and clinched them in her fist as she closed her eyes to the welling up of tears. The Marines around her just stood there as silent witnesses to the grief stricken soldier.

Larkin caught Yahzee's attention and motioned him to the side with a quick jerk of his head. The pair stepped back into the jungle and gave some space to the mourning SSgt. Facing out into the dense green Yahzee gave his debrief to the team leader. He described how he had followed the trail for better than an hour and was about to turn around when he smelled their cooking fires. It was as he was working his way around the perimeter that he came across the first of the U.S. soldiers. His description of their condition was enough to turn a strong man's stomach, but the worse was yet to come. The third dog tag he had recovered was from the last survivor. She had been repeatedly raped, sodomized and tortured nearly to death. Then to add insult to injury they placed tourniquets around her limbs and slowly sawed them off. Yahzee had found her still breathing, barely alive. Her glazed eyes focused for a few seconds and recognized his insignia. With silent lips she begged him to end it for her. The debrief ended there.

For several minutes the pair stood silently, not moving and barely breathing, as the anger welled up from the fiery depths. Larkin turned to his comrade and grabbed his shoulder. The pair locked eyes and the Staff Sergeant slowly nodded his acknowledgement.

"Payback..." Larkin whispered.

"...is a bitch." Yahzee responded.

Larkin walked back into the center of his team with a malicious purpose that all the men immediately picked up. "Strip for combat."

The Marines looked at their leader questioningly at first and then caught the meaning of his gaze. They started to drop their rucks and rearrange their gear for hot- hard – and nasty. Larkin walked over to the sobbing SSgt on the ground. He touched her shoulder.

"Yahzee found the bastards that did this....we're going hunting. You stay here and watch the gear until we return."

The look that Staff Sergeant Katherine Stacy, Medical Specialist, U.S. Army Rangers, gave Larkin could have burned a hole through the sun.

"Like hell I'm sitting here Staff Sergeant. Those were my friends, my friends...."

She sobbed. "I won't be left behind, simple because...because...because I'm a girl."

"It's not like that Cat, we don't know you. You don't know us. We work as team and you are an unknown."

"I will not be left behind, Marine! You lead and I'll follow, but I will not be left behind!"

The other Marines stopped and watched the scene unfolding before them. Larkin was right in that she wasn't part of the team, that would make her a liability, but at the same time they didn't see the Ranger being left out of the fight.

Cat turned and started stripping her gear down to the bare essentials. She knew her equipment and was ready in the blink of an eye. Larkin just stood there watching her silently. Throwing on her gear on she spun around and was ready to go. Larkin slowly looked over at his men and took their silent vote. It was unanimous...she was in.

"Doc...she's with you. Staff Sergeant, if the Doc says shit, don't even think to ask what color or how high...got it?"

"Affirmative." She responded stoically.

It took several hours for the team to work their way into position. The hour was late, after midnight when the camp finally settled in for the night. The perimeter guards had switched forty-five minutes earlier and were becoming lulled into their duties. The men they replaced on watch could be heard snoring or softly breathing in deep sleep. As insidious as a moon lit fog...death began to drift in among them, stalking them.

Yahzee let the rover walk past him before he stepped from the shadows, his hand was a blur as he sunk his machete deep into the back of the guerillas neck severing the second and third vertebra and slicing cleanly through his spinal cord. The Marine caught his victim as he collapsed and pulled him quietly back into the shadows of the underbrush. The squad radio keyed once.

Zipper inched his way up to the second guard and could smell the rice and fish sauce from his breath as he plunged his K-Bar upward into his kidney. Covering the guerillas mouth to stifle any scream with his other hand he continued to push the blade tip up into the diaphragm puncturing it before withdrawing it from the shocked mans body and then opening his windpipe and carotid artery. The squad radio keyed twice.

The third guard, bored with his post, lit a cigarette and took his first and last pull on the cancerous weed. Cancer would be the least of his concerns in the next

few seconds. Something flew past his face and knocked the ash from the end of the cigarette dangling in his mouth. Before the threat could register in his mind the thin piano wire garrote snapped close around his neck. With arms that could easily push four hundred pounds of barbells repeated throughout a work out and pull two hundred and twenty five pounds of rock hard Marine up to the chin up bar twenty times as fast as you could count, the wire dug through flesh, it constricted until it met bone, hesitated and then crushed its way through. His head hit the soft undergrowth and rolled a few feet away. Three guards were down with one to go. The squad radio keyed for the third time.

SSgt Stacy followed the Navy Corpsman as he worked his way around the perimeter rigging “surprises” that he pulled from his bag of “devious deeds and dastardly devices”. She had seen a lot of training on setting up booby traps but had never witnessed someone that could rig one so fast.

The last guard was actually performing his guard duties as it should be done. SSgt Larkin watched for an opening knowing the others would be finishing up soon. He backed off a few feet and reached back for the pouch attached to the side of his camelback water carrier. With practiced motions he kept his eyes on the guard and quickly assembled the compound bow. This operation took less than a minute and then he moved back into position. Larkin was an avid bow hunter between missions and had honed his skills to a fine edge. The bow was a slightly shorter version of his full size Bear and designed for just this sort of duty. He nocked the first arrow and held a second at the ready.

The guard slowly scanned the jungle in front of him. He was using his peripheral vision to pick up any movements. This was one serious soldier. Larkin’s aim had to be perfect the first time. He lowered the night vision goggles, closed his left eye then turned them on. The jungle came alive as a grainy green glow. Larkin could see the guard’s eye, his target. He pulled back the arrow and could feel the cams silently turnover and lock. Seconds seem to bleed into hours as the guard slowly moved about always scanning the jungle before him. Larkin took a slow breath and exhaled, then another. He needed that last second clarity of vision. He could feel his heart beat pounding in his ear as he drew in another breath. His vision sharpened just slightly and he marked his target. The guard was turning back as Larkin released. The arrow jumped the twenty yards distance between them. His aim had been slightly high as the arrow point caught the upper edge of the left eye’s orbit, but the effect was not much different at this angle. It pierced through the guard’s weak gelatinous eye, splitting thin bone behind the socket and drove into the soft brain tissue. Spasms pulsed through the dying body as a second projectile slammed through the right temple. The guard slumped to the ground. The squad radio keyed for the forth time.

Several minutes passed before the fifth and sixth key was added. They were ready and hell fire was about to arrive.

Seven hand grenades silently arched through the air and landed with heavy thuds on the hard packed earth of the camp. The seconds ticked away as the fuses burned down to the explosive concoction within. Several of the guerillas stirred at the muffled noise, but none rose to check it out when suddenly the night exploded all around them. Tiny shards of hot metal reached out and met soft flesh. They jumped up in total confusion and began firing wildly in all directions hitting several of their own people in the process. It was sheer pandemonium as over thirty rudely awakened guerillas scrambled to get to their fighting positions after being caught totally off guard.

After several minutes of sporadic fire without any return fire the guerillas stood gazing into the darkness amid the smoldering remains of their camp and the screams and moans of their wounded. What the hell had just happened? They stood around in shock, uncertain, unsure of what to do next. The smoke slowly drifted away and they stood staring into the darkness and then the night opened up on them.

From nearly every direction the forest spit forth hot metal out of the inky velvet that seemed guided by some hideous evil as retribution rained in on them. The Marine's fire discipline was unrelenting as they crisscrossed the compound with cool calm and methodical precision pounding away until nothing moved and nothing breathed.

Two days later when the supply train walked into the guerrilla camp they were met with a vision right out of Dante's Inferno. The faces of their comrades stared silently back at them from their position spiked on short poles around the camp. In the center of the forehead of the guerrilla whose boot had the broken lug was nailed the Eagle Globe and Anchor collar device.

Larkin stood on the hilltop overlooking the bay. He glassed the area carefully but there wasn't a single sign of any of the U.S. military presence that had occupied this area just a few weeks ago. No ships, no tents, nothing.

"Well, Staff Sergeant... what now?" Zipper asked.

"It's gonna be a long walk home." Sgt Stevens added.

"Yeah...right, how are we going to do that?" asked LCpl Chavez. "We gonna walk on water?"

"If that's what the Staff Sergeant wants, then that's what he gets." replied Doc Nabors.

Larkin turned back to his team. "For now gents, we walk." He paused. "But I've got an idea."

Larkin crouched down in front of them. "Doc, didn't you say you know how to sail?"

"Whoa, that was a long time ago and in a very little boat." The Corpsman responded. "You're talking about crossing the biggest ocean on this planet! That's a little different from sailing a dinky little sabot across a duck pond, Staff Sergeant."

"It's just a matter of scale Doc." Larkin answered. "Just a matter of scale."

Desert Doc

Pax Americana Chapter 58 – Gopher Snakes

Eli stared out the front window into the darkness, seeing nothing but the darkness within. It had been many days since his son Jacob had gone. After Jacob had run and the savages had set off after him, Eli had taken the two girls with him quickly and quietly back to the farm. The girls had been wooden, strange. The ordeal they had undergone was horror. Nothing in the realm of modern, middle class life had prepared the girls for the abuse that occurred. They were numb with shock, pain and disbelief, and Eli led them by the hand through the forest to his house. Mary had taken the girls in and had comforted them, fed them and treated their physical wounds. Eli had told her nothing about what had happened to Jacob, and Mary had been too stunned with the strays he had brought home to ask.

The girls had been a vexing problem. Over and above the problems that they presented by being “English” and therefore lazy, spoiled complainers, their ordeal had left them prone to fits of crying, catatonia, and bouts of screaming. Mary had been so very patient with them, and they were showing signs of improvement. They helped Mary and his own children in the kitchen, and if they did not help much, neither did they hinder. Their poor appetites did not make too large of a dent on the Yoder’s food supply, at least for now.

Eli stood at the window most every night. After Jacob had run, he had expected him to return later that night. Every moment that Jacob did not return was agonizing.

Winter was coming quickly, and the addition of two more mouths to feed may soon present problems. In the time since the incident, the girls had been able to tell him a little of what happened. They were cousins, children of Mr. Thompson’s children. They lived not terribly far away –by car- nearly a hundred and fifty miles, and when the Brown and the Plague had started, their parents had fled to the only “safe” place that they knew: Mom and Dad’s house. Things went from bad to worse quickly, there.

The girls were Cassie, age seventeen and Amanda, age fifteen. Cassie was tall, nearly six feet, and had brownish-blond hair and brown eyes. Amanda was shorter, at five feet three inches, brown hair and eyes and was slightly pudgy. Of the two, Amanda was the one who complained more, about the food, the lack of TV, the “funny clothes” and various other small insults to her well-being. She was, however, the one who seemed to be recovering from the trauma of her experience the fastest. She had fewer bouts of tearful catatonia, fewer episodes of screaming, and fewer nightmares.

Eli had left most of their care to Mary, and had instead divided himself between preparing for winter and looking for Jacob. He went into the woods to scout for firewood, and also to look for signs of Jacob. He feared that the men had caught

him, and had killed him, leaving his body for the animals. He had searched around the Thompson's farm but had found no bodies that were Jacob. He had worked hard to bury the members of the Thompson family that he did find –each in a grave shallower than he would have liked- but could not find any of the marauder's corpses. He suspected that they had taken the bodies with them. Perhaps there was honor among thieves.

The next Sunday after the attack on the Thompson's, he had taken his family by horse buggy to church, quietly insisting that the two girls come along. Through perhaps some feeling of gratitude, or simply because they were curious, the girls had assented. They had fidgeted and whispered through the three-hour service, but it went better than Eli or Mary had hoped. After the service, the elders had met upstairs. Eli was not an elder, but was invited to attend. Many elders sat around a large table, while some were seated in chairs. Bishop Samuel Hochstadter began with a prayer, and then began to speak.

“We know that hard times are upon us again. There has been much talk of the crops and their lack of progress”

This drew a chuckle from the elders. They liked dry humor the best.

“Though we have not been affected as greatly by the plague that affects the country, there is a new threat to us. Eli, will you please tell us what happened?”

Eli did not know that he would be called on to speak, and his mouth became dry as he stood.

“Elders.” He said looking around the room, then began to recount the events that had transpired. Some of the Elders had known of what happened, some were hearing the story for the first time, murmuring in incredulity, but they all paid rapt attention to what he had to say.

When he finished, he remained standing, knowing that there would be questions.

“Thank you, Eli. You have shown great compassion taking in the two English girls. Did you recognize any of the men who did this thing?”

“No, Elder, I did not. It was dark, and most of them were not that close to me. The two that were close to me did not say their names.”

Another Elder posed a question. “You say that they seemed interested in food?”

“Yes, Elder.” Eli replied. “The ones close to me –who seemed to be the leaders- said that they ‘need to take places to eat.’ I received the impression that the Thompson's were not the first home they attacked. They seemed wicked, wicked men.”

“What did they gain then, by burning the Thompson’s house?”

“Nothing, Elder.” Said Eli, and then thought again. “Possibly they did it for revenge. The Thompson’s had slain several of the men.”

“What do you think has become of Jacob?” Asked yet another Elder.

“I believe he is dead, Elder. I just have yet to find his body.” He took a deep breath and continued. “I know he is cast into the Lake of Fire far from our Lord’s sight because of his actions, but he was a good son and I love him still.”

“I know that you do, Eli.” Said Bishop Hochstadter. “And I hope he can be given a proper burial when he is found. But we must discuss the matter at hand. How did these men arrive at the Thompson house?”

“I don’t know that, Elder. I presume in cars or tucks, but I cannot be certain.”

“Did you say that they had not eaten in several days?”

“Yes, Elder, they said that they really needed to ‘take’ the Thompson’s place, because they hadn’t eaten in two days.”

“Would you suppose that they would try this horrible attack again in another place?”

“Elder, it would be foolish to think that they would not. There’s something else that we may wish to consider. Mr. Thompson –before the attack happened- told me of other attacks of this sort in the area. He also said that it was a matter of time before these...bandits start to look for our farms especially. He said that when they learn that we will not fight, and store more food than the English, they would come for us.”

The room was silent. Whether or not the Elders had considered this previously, Eli did not know. Many of them nodded thoughtfully, stroking their grizzled beards. Some glanced at each other, others eyed their shoes in contemplation.

Eli said, “I have taken measures to avoid notice. I have blocked our drive with large hay bales. I have covered our windows with paper and cardboard, so no light escapes. It may not help us at all, but it may be enough to hide us from the bandits.”

The others nodded thoughtfully again, and the silence continued.

Finally, Bishop Hochstadter spoke. “There have been attacks on some of our people in other parts of the county. We had thought that it was part of the chaos going on, but now it seems that these are perhaps attacks targeting us.”

“Perhaps. What can we do about it?” said another Elder from the back.

“We can send someone to the Sheriff, for one. For another, I think Eli has the right idea: Do not invite attack. Keep your heads low. Do not attract attention. Thirdly of course, is to pray. Any other ideas?”

“I have one.” Said an Elder seated at the table. “I have an English neighbor. He needs food, and I have some. I will ask him to watch out for us, and we will give him food.”

“You would ask him to kill for you?” asked a disbelieving Elder Hochstadter.

“I said nothing of killing. Anyway, what would ask the Sheriff to do? Would he not do this if he must, too? If he could not drive them away? What of the taxes we pay? What does that money go to? Not entirely for feeding the poor, I suspect.”

“Elder Schwarzwald!” shouted Bishop Hochstadter as he shot to his feet, his face darkening. “I will not tolerate your impertinence or blasphemy! We must remain true to God and not to emotion. I will brook no more talk of killing.”

The accused Elder said nothing as he pressed his lips firmly in a line and crossed his arms upon his chest.

“Now.” said the Bishop as he sat, the color of his face returning somewhat to normal. “We need practical suggestions to this problem. Solutions that hold God in our hearts.”

Another Elder spoke. “God forbids violence against another, but neither does He ask us to be lambs to the slaughter. We must devise ways to make it difficult to get us. Ways to trick, to deceive, to hide and to run. Consider our own Gopher snake, brethren. God has created this wonderful creature and I believe it may serve as an example to us. The gopher snake’s bite is not poisonous, and it hides from danger when it can, but our Almighty Creator has given this creature a wonderful gift: It looks very similar to a deadly poisonous rattlesnake. It even vibrates its tail in the ground debris to make a rattle. It is a mimic, brothers. Perhaps we could follow its example. Few English know what we look like. I mean us as individuals.”

He stood and glanced around the room at the other Elders. “With your permission Bishop, Elders.”

The Bishop looked dubious, as did one or two of the Elders, but the Bishop sighed and nodded his assent.

“What if,” he began, “What if we were to disguise ourselves? Perhaps something as simple as not wearing our hats. I suggest even constructing and carrying replica wooden weapons. This would do two things. First, no matter the

circumstances, none of us would be tempted to shoot. Second, they could not be used against us. We may also consider banding together in closer proximity. Several families could present an intimidating front, all 'carrying rifles'. It would appear to the bandits a heavily armed camp. We would need to be discrete about other of our things, such as the buggies and horses and the like, but it could work to keep us from being attacked.

Brethren, I know this is unlike anything we have done in the past. But we should not let fear dictate our actions: We should let God dictate our actions. I do not believe any of what I have proposed is against God's instructions. We are being apart as our Lord commands, nor shall we harm anyone."

There was silence after the Elder had spoken. Many were nodding in unspoken agreement, while others looked askance at him. The Bishop made no indication of his thoughts. Instead, he slowly lowered his head to his hands. Another sigh heaved his shoulders, then he looked up and around at the assembled Elders.

"Brethren, we have come to difficult times. These times will test us." He looked at each one in turn. "We must pray. Pray and study the word of God. It is in Him that we must place our trust."

The assembled Elders murmured their agreement. These words were close to their hearts. They heard them several times a week and formed a mantra: A comforting rote of words that touched their souls.

But the Bishop was not finished. "But we must also look to our own affairs. Elder Olkjer is –God help us- right. We must work to become even more separate than before. Let us consider other ideas."

A general murmur arose in the small room. Elder Olkjer spoke again after a few moments. "Bishop. Elders. I suggest that we call a meeting of the heads of the families. We need to explain our positions, and convince them to band together. They are also a clever people. They may have other ideas that we here have not had come to us."

Another murmur of assent rose, and Elder turned to Elder to discuss the situation. Not all were convinced of the need or Godliness of these latest decisions, but the Bishop had directed them. Snatches of conversation continued as the meeting broke up.

"Brother, what of a wall..."

"What if we were to make our home look burned and deserted?"

Eli rode home with his family after the meeting and thought hard about his plans. His farm was already concealed from casual observation; he merely needed to

make it more so. That was the rub: If he blocked the long driveway with more than offset hay bales, it would prevent him from using it, too. He supposed he could take the buggy through a path in the woods, provided the path was not obvious. He had the feeling that they would not be traveling overmuch anyway.

The other family that Eli had invited to join them was due to arrive in the morning. There was much to be done in that time. Mary and the girls would move the bedrooms around, while Eli rearranged the shed and barn to accommodate the extra horses and buggy. Daniel Schug, the father of the other family was a craftsman –a machinist- and had some tools that were portable that he was bringing. His large lathes and milling machines could not be moved of course without a huge effort. Additionally, unlike the English machines that were driven by electricity, Daniel's ran off an intricate belt system from a central shaft down the center of his shop building. The shaft was in turn powered by a diesel engine outside. It would have taken weeks in the best of times to move everything to the Yoder's farm and make it operational.

The next few days were a flurry of activity. The Schug family consisted of the two adults, a fifteen-year-old boy David, a fourteen-year-old girl Sarah, and twin nine-year-old girls Maria and Margaret. They were all extremely helpful and cheerful, and soon the house was full to the brim, but mostly happy. Daniel was a wonder, even without his large machines. He was quick to fix anything on the farm that he noticed needed repair, and the work was done quickly and well. He and Eli -with the help of David and even Sarah- had done their best to bar the driveway by felling trees across it, and bringing wheelbarrow after wheelbarrow of leaves from distant parts of the wood to spread upon the driveway. It had taken great effort to cover the portion of the driveway that could be seen from the county road until it rounded the gentle hill, which hid the rest of the farm. Some of this was a wasted effort, as the wind picked up some of the leaves and blew them away. Sarah had hit upon the idea of laying down boughs and branches to hold the leaves down, and this had helped moderate the effects of the wind. All in all, however a survey from the road showed that their efforts had done much to minimize the appearance of a home and driveway.

Daniel had also suggested transplanting some of the thorn bushes that grew in patches in the woods to the fence line and especially the driveway. They also began work on their "rifles." They consisted of wooden laths and other pieces of wood painted black. Daniel had handled a wicked-looking black rifle that one of his customers had brought into his shop for some machine work. He had done the work as the man had requested, machining quite easily as that part of the rifle had been made of aluminum.

At the end of the four days that the Schugs has been with them, it began to snow heavily. Winter had finally come, and it promised to be a brutal one.

Pax Americana 59 -- Valley Forge

“We've arranged a civilization in which most crucial elements profoundly depend on science and technology. We have also arranged things so that almost no one understands science and technology. This is a prescription for disaster. We might get away with it for a while, but sooner or later this combustible mixture of ignorance and power is going to blow up in our faces.”

Carl Sagan

"The Earth is degenerating today. Bribery and corruption abound. Children no longer obey their parents, every man wants to write a book, and it is evident that the end of the world is fast approaching."

[Assyrian tablet, c. 2800 BC]

“There is no education like adversity.”

Disraeli

Brentwood looked out the window of his Maryland home. There had been a heavy snowfall the night before adding another six inches to the foot and a half already on the ground. He wondered how many Americans were suffering during this most recent cold snap while he stood there safe and snug in his custom executive estate. His external wounds had healed, his jaw still twinged from time to time but he could live with that. Through the diligent work of his ever-present bodyguard, Marine Gunnery Sergeant Talford, he was probably in the best shape of his life. He worked out every day with the Gunny, and while he would never achieve the combat readiness of his Marine mentor he doubted that there was another federal worker of his rank in as good of shape. What really set him apart and was a small dalliance that he was allowed by the Director of Homeland Security in an ever-present bulge under his left arm. Brentwood never went anywhere unarmed. Never.

What Brentwood lacked in physical strength and agility he more than made up for with his marksmanship skills. Talford had been amazed how quickly this typical milquetoast Washington governmental bureaucrat had absorbed every scrap of learning and guidance he had given him. Perhaps, it was the fact that Brentwood had no bad habits to unlearn, having never had any experience, desire or training with weapons, he was a blank canvas to work with. Or perhaps it was because he truly realized the dire necessity of this particular tool and the survival skills that go with it. Either way, in a very short time his star pupil had mastered the fine art of pistol craft and had honed his marksmanship to the point that if Brentwood could see it...he could hit it....every time.

Talford approached the stoic executive staring out the window at the falling snow.

“The workers have finished their clean up and the job is ready for your inspection, Sir.”

“Please Gunny, I’m not an officer in your Marine Corps, Brent is fine when we’re at home.”

“Force of habit, Sir...er...Brent.” The Gunny stepped to the side and held out his arm in the direction of the door. “Still seems odd.”

Brentwood turned towards the Gunny. “I realize that. But I have to have someplace that I can feel relaxed and at ease. Calling me Sir certainly doesn’t do that.”

“Aye-aye, skipper.” The Gunny replied.

Brentwood stopped and cocked his head at his hard chiseled Marine. “You are absolutely incorrigible Gunny, absolutely incorrigible.”

“That I am, Sir...er...Brent, that I am.”

The pair chuckled and headed off to inspect the new indoor shooting range that had just been completed in the basement of his Maryland estate. Since his return from the northern peninsula excursion and his convalescent leave following a short hospital stay, the newly returned Homeland Security Secretary for Transportation had been extremely busy.

Brentwood was no longer satisfied with his small bachelor apartment inside the beltway of Washington D.C., convenient though it was. The proximity of so many people crowded around him made him feel like a rabbit in a cage stacked among many, so the search began. His senior bodyguard, Marine Gunnery Sergeant Talford had discovered his new residence after an exhaustive search. The modifications to the property were already underway when Talford finally brought Brentwood home from the hospital to his new abode. To the casual eye his newly acquired ten-acre country estate appeared little changed from the previous owner. The gate was a little heavier and now automatic.

There were some cosmetic differences visible from the outside of the Craftsman style home such as the large heavy shutters that now adorned every window of the brick and river-rock structure. The majority of the changes however were hidden from casual view. Every window and external door now had an automatic roll down steel curtain that could be activated at the push of a button. The craftsmen that installed the roll away metal barriers had done such a superb job that beyond the tracks on either side of the window frames the entire apparatus was nearly invisible. Buried ground sensors ringed the property both inside and outside of the stone wall that circled estate. The alarm system was state of the art. Not even a cockroach could move in the house without being monitored. But

what really made this property unique were the other hidden preparations.

The property had been rumored to have housed some rather notorious figures in the past. Sealed off from several generations of modern occupants were several underground rooms that, during the heyday of prohibition, had served as both a storage facility and brewery for the rich thirsty clientele that drove out from the beltway to enjoy rather intoxicating weekends. These rooms had now been converted over to more useful purposes and housed well over a year's worth of food and supplies to support more than a dozen people. Hidden behind secret doors and down dark passageways, "The Bunker", as Talford described the underground complex, would quickly evolve into the nerve center for the fledgling militia resistance in the D.C. area over the next several months. The old rum-running tunnels and rooms of that bygone era were now serving against a different kind of prohibition, a prohibition against freedom and liberty. And now, thrust into the center of that rising maelstrom, was a slightly built, mild and meek man. What Brentwood lacked in raw charisma and leadership, he made up for in his ability to plan, organize and direct. He was creating a hidden government, within the hidden government, a most difficult and dangerous occupation to take up.

Just before Brentwood followed the Gunny to inspect the most recent construction, a strange foreboding thought crossed his mind.

How does one know if they have picked the right side? He had been thinking about this question a lot lately.

When, if ever, did Benedict Arnold, an early hero of the first American Revolution, realize after crossing over that he had chosen the wrong side and that his legacy would be that of a traitor rather than a patriot?

As Brentwood followed the Gunny down into "The Bunker" to inspect the recent addition he mulled the current situation over and over in his mind. He loved his country and the American ideals, but somewhere the dream that had started so very long ago had become sidetracked. Kidnapped by greedy selfish men and women with only two thoughts on their hungry minds, that of power and money. But the same question kept echoing through his thoughts. Could they reclaim the ideals of freedom and liberty? Could they put the train back on the right track, and if so, what would be the final cost?

Was he a patriot....or....was he about to become a traitor?

Kevin stepped out of the shed into the crisp grey cloud covered afternoon and removed his goggles and respirator to catch a breath of fresh air. Soft cotton ball size clusters of snowflakes drifted down and muted all sound around him. He made a mental note that they would have to shovel the path to the main shop

again before nightfall. With three feet of snow already on the ground and more coming down at a steady rate the path would soon be buried again. Today had been especially productive. He had just completed the last run of the day for the Parkerizing tanks. Tomorrow they would have another twenty-five receivers ready to assemble and by the end of the week another batch of battle rifles would be added to the community armory. Kevin made sure the "Parking Shed" was secure and then headed back to the main shop to check on the progress of the many different projects they were working on.

After recovering from the initial shock of the battle to free their village from the tyranny of the Homeland Security Forces, his adopted mountain community had finally realized the full ramifications of their actions. They were totally and absolutely on their own. They had suffered and survived the plague, outlasted the vandalism of thugs and beat off the draconian jack-booted oppression of government troops, and now they had survived their total isolation from the rest of the world. It was time to sink or swim entirely on their own without any outside help. There would be no Red Cross, no welfare, and no cavalry riding over the hilltop to protect them, no aid or assistance from anywhere. It proved to be a very rude awakening for many in the community. For some of the old timers it was a flash back to the leaner times of their childhood; the Depression or the big War. For others it was the stark reality of their worst nightmares. More than half of the population had been decimated by the plague or run off to greener pastures or distant relatives. What was left was a rather motley bunch of leftover's that somehow – somehow had to pull together and work as a team if they were to survive. But mountain folk are tough folk and it didn't take too long for them to finally iron out their differences and begin the long and tedious work of rebuilding their community.

It was established right off the bat that there would be no room for slackers. If you did not work or contribute to the community, then you would be shown the road - post haste. Several families that had been generational welfare recipients were absolutely unwilling to accept their new responsibilities and were quickly shown the door and escorted across the last bridge out of town with sufficient rations and fuel to make the journey to the next town down the road. They left at gunpoint slinging curses and hollow threats, but they left all the same. Those that had been hesitant to support the new order quickly rechecked their attitudes and happily joined in the program.

A new village counsel was quickly elected with a recovering Frank Richardson promoted to its helm. In no time at all Kevin and Stephanie suddenly found themselves drafted into positions within the leading body. Kevin had never been so busy in his entire life. He understood the need for expedience with winter quickly approaching. For once the snows blew in they would be blocked off from the rest of the world until spring. Due to his experience with heavy equipment and the workings of the water district back home in Pennsylvania, he was placed in charge of the communities' water system. Stephanie was the only active

medical provider left in town, besides the Vet and an old retired school nurse. She suddenly found herself promoted to the status of country doctor in charge of their little medical clinic. A new-age herbalist named Naomi Shorewood joined the medical team along with Steph, Dr. Morrison – the local Vet, and Mrs. Evie Bourne, the retired school nurse. This small group made up the entire medical support for anyone above the rim of the foothills.

The loss of population proved to be a boon for the remaining survivors. Once Kevin insured that the community water supply was fully intact, operational and safe he joined the largest scavenger hunt he had ever seen. It had been Earl Schroder, the local plumber and village elder's idea to consolidate the community's resources from the abandoned homes and businesses.

"Those folks that have left or died don't have any use for the stuff they left behind. We will!" He paused. "Now I'm not saying we just bust in and take anything...no, that wouldn't be right. But we've got to know what we have to work with and anything we find we can take for the sake of the community by..."

He looked around. "James, what's that legal word...for...taking stuff for the good of the community?"

James Stokes, a realtor, thought for a moment before answering. "Eminent domain, I think is what it's called."

"Yeah, that's it, eminent domain. We can take an inventory and leave IOUs or something like that."

The heads around the room began to nod in agreement.

So it began. Food was of course the top priority along with any medical supplies, weapons, canning equipment and tools. Soon light bulbs and toilet paper joined the list with toilet paper moving right to the top rather quickly. The local supermarket became a storeroom along with the hardware store and auto parts store next door. Every member of the community was issued a "Standard Arm"; usually a recovered M-16 liberated from the National Guard Armory or the defeated Homeland Security Troops, and a pistol. The remaining "spoils of war" were housed in the Armory itself or several other secure caches scattered across the small mountain valley.

It was an odd sight at first to see citizens going about their daily business with an assault rifle slung across their back or over their shoulder and/or pistols worn openly on the hip or in shoulder holsters. Rifle racks mounted just inside of entrance of many businesses sprung up in just a matter of days. Yet for all the hardship and struggle, for all the weapons freely carried about, their little town became a much calmer and better mannered environment. Perhaps it was true that an armed society was a polite society...only time would tell.

It was in the local private storage yard that the scavenging crews hit the bonanza. Among the piles of boxes of personal effects and junk they located several large caches long-term storage foods. Hundreds of pounds of wheat, oats, rice and several pallets of processed and freeze dried foods. Of course they also discovered several stashes of previously banned firearms and thousands of rounds of ammunition along with reloading supplies. But the greatest find had been the cases and cases of old canning jars and equipment. They were thinking towards the future when such items would become vital in insuring their survival through the harsh winters. With the owners of these caches either dead or gone from the community this unexpected bounty was quickly gathered up and properly stored among the communities growing assets.

It was a full time job just cataloging the community property that came in. Maggie, the first villager the Jorgenson family had met, and several of the older village merchants along with both of Kevin's daughters Samantha, Amanda and a couple of other energetic teenagers took on the daunting task of inventorying and sorting out the finds.

An unexpected asset came from one of the village outcasts. Troy Henderson came from the wrong side of the tracks as far as most folks on the mountain were concerned. His family held firm to the lowest peg on the pecking order here. Barely literate and raw in manners from his Spartan upbringing, what he lacked from his "white trash" heritage he more than made up for with his ability to locate things. Troy was the king of all scroungers and the villager's conduit into the lucrative black market that had sprung up across the country as the normal channels of consumer goods dried up. The switch from running drugs to commodities had been a small one. But if there was something that you needed and you were willing to pay for it...Troy could probably get it.

The discovery of this vital talent came as quite a surprise for the village. During one of the first big meetings Stephanie was lamenting about their lack of basic essential medicines. What the previous armed occupiers could not get high on they destroyed. Dr. Morrison had been able to cover some of the antibiotic needs with some animal medications, but that reserve was quickly diminishing. Naomi's herbs were helpful but were not as effective against the stronger infections. Somehow, from the shadows, Troy had constructed a shopping list of vital supplies, and a week and a half later Samantha discovered cases of valuable medicines stacked neatly inside the patient waiting room when she unlocked the front door to the clinic to begin the day. The only hint of their benefactor had been a short note attached to one box. It read: "For helping my baby girl."

It took several days for Samantha to finally figure out and track down Troy. She used the excuse of a medical visit to check up on little Brittany. The little five-year old had been treated for bi-lateral ear infections and pneumonia.

The Henderson's ramshackle doublewide sat at the end of a quarter mile long dirt driveway, hidden among the trees. Even with the Richardson's three-quarter ton four wheel drive pickup it was rough going bouncing up the rutted driveway. Steph had insisted on going out alone but Kevin would have none of that. So the couple arrived in the early afternoon. When the door finally opened up after several knocks the air was pungent with heavy sweet odor of pot and incense. It was evident that a hasty clean up had taken place before Troy's common law wife answered the door. Troy was standing on the other side of the kitchen counter his hands hidden from view. Missy, his wife let the Jorgenson's in.

"Hello Mr. and Mrs. Henderson." Stephanie began. "We were out in the neighborhood and thought we'd drop in and check on your little girl. I just want to make sure her ears and lungs have cleared up."

There was an uneasy silence for a few seconds before Troy walked out from behind the counter and put the shotgun he was holding back up in the rack above the television.

"Sorry, Mrs. Stephanie, we don't get visitors out this way too often. No disrespect intended."

"None taken." Steph answered. "Have you met my husband Kevin?"

"No Ma'am, though I've seen him at the meetings." Troy answered hesitatingly extending his hand.

Kevin took his hand and returned a firm but equal handshake. Kevin then turned to Troy's wife.

"Good afternoon, Mrs. Henderson, and how is your little girl doing?"

Several small heads were peeking around the corner that led to the hallway and bedrooms beyond.

"Well, fine, just fine." The shy woman answered. "She's right here...come on in here, Brit, the nice lady doctor is here to check up on you."

While Stephanie went about her business with the mother and child, Kevin stepped closer to Troy standing nervously in Kevin's much larger shadow.

"That was a good thing you did for the community Mr. Henderson."

Troy just stared blankly back before answering. "I didn't do it for the community. Miss Stephanie helped my little girl, probably saved her life."

He thought for a moment and then continued. "I know most folks around here

don't think much of me and mine. I ain't educated nor fancy n'all, but I do love my kids and takes care of them the best that I know how."

Kevin just nodded back.

"Well you did good Mr. Henderson...you did very good."

"And I want you to know that I didn't steal them drugs. 'Cause that's what most folks will say I did. I traded for them fair and square."

"I believe you."

"It's the God's honest truth!"

"I believe you Mr. Henderson."

"Well...yeah...ok. And don't go calling me Mister. That's like trying to put a fancy title on a pig's ass. My name's Troy, just Troy."

"OK, Troy. My first name is Kevin."

The pair stood there for a few uneasy seconds and then Troy offered Kevin a beer. Kevin wasn't much of a beer drinker, especially with several feet of snow on the ground, but to refuse would be discourteous under the present situation. Kevin nodded his head.

"That would be fine Troy, just fine."

When Troy returned with the two cold Bud's Kevin motioned towards the door.

"How about we step out on the porch Troy, I've got a little business I'd like to discuss with you."

The snow had stopped falling and their feet crunched under their steps. Kevin leaned against the rail and welcomed the clean fresh air. He had been getting mildly claustrophobic in the heavily laced air within the mobile home.

"I would like to start off by thanking you again for the medicine you acquired. Stephanie really appreciated the surprise."

"Well, it was the least I could do after what she done for my little Brit, 'n she didn't ask for a single dime, just done it and really was worried about my little girl."

"That's Stephanie, she cares for every one of her patients like there were her own. But what I would like to talk to you about is on a totally different note."

"I swear to you, Mr. Jorgenson, I didn't steal none of it! Someone else might

have, I don't know nothing bout that. What I got I traded for fair and square."

"Oh, I'm sure you did and I totally believe you, Troy. And that is sort of what I'm here to talk to you about." Kevin took another sip of the cold beer.

"You see, Troy, back when I was in the Army just about every unit had a person with your skill. We called them the unit scrounger or "Comm-Shaw artist".

"Comm-Shaw?" Troy parroted.

"Yeah, someone that could get something you needed when no one else could and usually for a lot less than you expected. I knew this Sergeant by the name of MacElroy that was simply amazing. He took a box of pencils and a stack of legal pads and through a series of swaps, trades, bartering and Comm-Shaw deals we somehow ended up with a nearly new pool table in the NCO shed. And then two weeks later a soda machine was being delivered to our hooch as well."

Kevin took another sip and continued. "I suspect that you, Mr. Henderson have those same skills, that of a Comm-Shaw Artist."

Troy thought about what he had just heard and a slow smile began to creep across his face. "I just might be one of them Comm-Shaw Artists type of people. I can swing a pretty good trade if I'm a mind to...and that is sort of what I did to get the medical drugs for Miss Stephanie."

"So if I were to give you a list of...say some things that we could really use. Do you think you could acquire some of these items?" Kevin reached in his pocket and pulled out a folded piece of paper and handed it to Troy.

He looked at it for a few seconds and then looked up disappointedly. "I'm sorry." He hesitated. "But...but...I...ah...er...well... I just don't read so good. I never finished school and all." He handed the slip of paper back.

"If you could just tell me what you want...then I can see if I can find it."

So Kevin read off the list and much to his surprise after he was done Troy repeated the entire list word for word from his memory without missing a single word, number or description.

"Most of that I know. But them collet things, I never heard of them before."

"They're used on Lathes and Mills. We need them in the machine shop."

"Old Conrad's place?" He asked.

'Yes, we've got it back open and working. But there's some holes in the inventory

that are vital for us to manufacture the parts and stuff we need.”

“Well if you show me what you need, what they look like then I’ll have a better chance of getting them and not getting ripped off.”

“Fair enough, just come by the shop...”

“NO, no that won’t do. Them folks there in town don’t really care for me to be hanging around.”

“But you’re helping them.” Kevin answered somewhat taken back at Troy’s response.

“NO, they muss-ent know that I’m doing this. I’m helping you and Miss Stephanie out cause you treat me and my family right. You don’t look down on us. You treat us like decent folks, not like the others. They can’t know, they just can’t know.”

Jacob Conrad had been the village’s jack-of-all-trades before his retirement two years previous. A self-taught machinist, welder, blacksmith and fix-it jockey, he come out of retirement and reopened his old metal shop near the center of town. The village now drew on the extensive knowledge of the elder generations as they geared up to the daunting task of becoming self-sufficient. It had been Kevin’s son Buck’s idea to take advantage of the small streams that passed through and around the village to produce the vital electricity needed by the community. Buck, along with his new found friends the Larkin brothers, became the driving force behind the endeavor. The trio combed through every book and resource in the small village library and came up with several workable plans to build small hydroelectric systems. Under old man Conrad’s guidance the trio quickly had several simple paddle wheel prototypes spinning away in the frigid mountain streams. Soon the community’s diesel generators were relegated to back up emergency support as small hydroelectric systems began to dot the stream banks and feed into the small power grid.

Troy Henderson showed up at Conrad’s several days later. He slinked in the front door and looked for Kevin amongst the dozen or so men working there. It wasn’t long until someone spotted him standing by the door quietly. Their response was not all together friendly.

“What do you want here Troy? NO DOPERS work here!”

Troy just stood there taking the insults until Ol’ Man Conrad approached him.

“What’s your business here, Troy?”

“I’m here to see Mr. Jorgenson.” He meekly replied.

By now the entire shift was watching events unfold in the front of the shop. Just then Kevin walked through the front door. The tension was thick and Kevin immediately regretted his tardiness. Motioning to Troy still standing to the side of the door with his hands in his pockets Kevin spoke loud enough for everyone to hear.

“He’s with me. Come on, Troy, let me show you what we need.” And he motioned Troy to follow.

Old Man Conrad looked first at Kevin, back to Troy and then back at Kevin before nodding his approval. The pair quickly moved into the back of the shop to the heavy machinery with Conrad right on their tail. Kevin began placing various items out for Troy’s inspection naming them off one by one. Troy repeated the description names and then he picked up and examined each one, running the item through his fingers and repeating the name. Conrad stood off to the side watching the bizarre event unfold.

The trio walked around the shop stopping here and there to examine an item. Troy suddenly stopped at the assembly table where one of the men was putting together several Uzi’s that had been reconstructed from kits furnished by Frank Richardson from his stash. Troy glanced at Kevin who gave him the go ahead and Troy careful examined the weapon. Kevin walked over to another table and grabbed a half a dozen magazines and placed them in front of Troy.

“Would these help in your negotiations?” Kevin asked.

Troy looked at the offered mags and hefted the Uzi. “It would surly make my Rep a lot stronger.” He replied flatly.

A few minutes later Troy left quietly with the Uzi and a bag full of magazines. Conrad met Kevin when he turned back from the door.

“Just what the hell was all that?”

“A test.”

“A test? You gave that good for nothing a personal tour of my shop and a perfectly good submachine gun! He’ll be back later to steal us blind and hock it all for one of his dope deals!”

“There is that risk.” Kevin replied mildly. “But I don’t think that will be the case here.”

“I thought you were a smart young man when I met you Kevin, but I’m beginning to have my doubts.” He stood there shaking his head. “You’re just casting pearls before swine. I’m telling you boy, just pearls before swine!”

“That may be Mr. Conrad, that may be. Or I could have just made a silk purse out of a sow’s ear.”

Through out the winter the community was a constant hum of activity. Every one had two or three jobs they were working on nearly full time every day. The villagers hit the sack exhausted every night. But it was a good kind of tired, because they could see the small amount of progress every day. Kevin had joined the dedicated crew that worked long hours in Jacob Conrad’s fabricating shop. He also taught, trained and supervised the villagers in the military techniques he had learned with the 10th Mountain during his stint in the Army. Already rugged outdoorsmen and women they quickly picked up the essential elements of his classes and were becoming a formidable weapon to contend with. The sight of white battle dress clad citizens performing hasty ambushes and maneuvering across the snowy terrain made him wonder what his forefathers must have thought about their future during that long hard winter spent in a little valley in Pennsylvania. Standing in the snowy field shouting orders across the expanse at his raw recruits he could feel a familiar kinship with a Prussian Baron that had filled this same capacity over two hundred years earlier. Kevin hoped they would have the same luck as those staunch forefathers.

This is not to say that everything was coming up roses. As rugged as the mountain-bred villagers are, they are just as independent as they are a tough lot. The weekly town meetings could become quite heated, but in the end they all realized that their situation was sink or swim and they were all in the same boat. The news that filtered in via the shortwave or from limited contact with the outside was not good. There seemed to be a rising resistance across the entire country. People were not satisfied with the government’s efforts to regain control and open rebellion was becoming more and more common. The plague had swept through a second time and virtually wiped out many first time survivors before finally burning out. It was quite a mess out there and Kevin was more than happy to be isolated as they were by the mountains even with all the risks of such isolation. But he was becoming very concerned about the coming spring. Not only for the possibility of the Security Forces returning to reclaim the village they had been chased out of, but even more he worried about how the community would provide for the food they would need to survive the next winter. High altitude farming is at best patchy and many of the common foods people are most familiar with simply couldn’t be grown there.

Two weeks later, the community suddenly found themselves having to reassess one of their least popular members. The call came in from the front gate down by the main bridge into town. Troy was back with a Peterbilt Semi-tractor trailer rig full of gear. A short while later, he pulled up in front of Conrad’s shop and jumped down from the rig. He walked up to Kevin who was standing beside Conrad and handed him a clipboard. On it was the list he had originally given to Troy.

"I managed to get most of the things on your list. Plus I picked up a few other things that I...sort of fell into. I'm still working on the circled things. They will take a little more time."

Kevin glanced over the list and the several sheets of paper underneath of the non-requested items. A big smile slowly stretched across his face and he handed the clipboard to Old Man Conrad. The stocky blacksmith's eyes practically bugged out of his face as he went down the list.

"WHAaa! Where in the hell did you find all this stuff?!" He stammered.

Kevin interrupted the amazed shop owner. "Never ask a Comm-Shaw Artist that question Mr. Conrad."

He turned and called out to the gathering crowd. "Let's get this gear unloaded and under cover."

He gave the wiry village Comm-Shaw Artist a hefty pat on the shoulder. Troy returned the appreciative pat with a big smile. He had finally found his niche.

Troy had left the village as an outcast, despised for his sorry upbringing and lack of social and economic status. But the rules had changed and what had been a negative attribute a few short months ago was now a vital survival skill. He still had a hankering for a puff of the weed from time to time. But suddenly Troy had a different Rep to protect and his newly found appreciation was more important to him than the call of that forbidden intoxicant. After his second successful Comm-Shaw run Troy requested from the village Elders permission to move into one of the empty houses in town. They readily granted his request. When Kevin noticed Troy on the streets these days there was a different air about the young man from when they had first met. He walked a little straighter and held his head a little higher.

For now they had met all the challenges and beat the odds. Kevin just hoped their luck and ingenuity would continue to hold out. These were good people his family had cast their lot with. Good people that deserved to survive. But he also knew that life gave you no guarantees.

It had been a busy month here in the mountains. He crossed the soft snow and entered the back door of the main shop. *I wonder what old man Conrad has pulled out of his sleeve this afternoon* he thought to himself as he walked towards the gathering workers near the center of the shop. Kevin looked over the top of several shorter men and could not believe his eyes. The old fart had assembled a large copper still.

"I guess we're going into the moonshine business." He said under his breath.

Pax Americana 60 -- Metamorphosis

“It is better to wake up late, than not at all.”

“You [should] not examine legislation in the light of the benefits it will convey if properly administered, but in the light of the wrongs it would do and the harm it would cause if improperly administered.”

Lyndon Johnson, former President of the U.S.

“Non-cooperation with evil is as much a duty as cooperation with good.”

Mohandas Gandhi

He leaned exhausted and panting against the side of the building, trying desperately to suck in enough air to provide the oxygen his body was desperately screaming for. He had never run so hard or so far in his entire life. He was shaking from the adrenaline that was pumping through every cell in his body. His vision was fading in and out with sparkling lights dancing in front of his eyes. Then the surge came and what little he had in his stomach erupted violently forth.

He awoke laying there on the cool ground with a bitter taste in his mouth. His breathing was back to normal; his heart was no longer pounding in his ears. He slowly pushed himself upright and listened to the wail of sirens far off in the distance. He had made it out of the zone...alive, and he still had the loaf of bread in his hand. It wasn't much, but it was something. The food riot had been unexpected, violent and deadly. Richard Kern still could not believe how close he came to joining those lying in the streets dying, their blood running across the blacktop and into the gutters. It had been more than the worst nightmare he could ever image. God, what insanity.

SSgt Larkin looked out over the marina through his binoculars. There were several boats that would suit their needs. Now all they had to do was pick the most seaworthy one, outfit it, escape the local authorities and sail across the largest ocean on the planet without dying in the attempt.

“Piece of cake.” He muttered to himself. “FUCKING PIECE OF CAKE!”

It had taken nearly a week to work their way south, avoiding any contact with the locals, to the hilltop where they now on that overlooked the marina. His team still did not fully know what the world situation was, other than somehow they had been left behind when the rest of the U.S. and Philippine military presence had suddenly and unexpectedly abandoned operations against the Muslim guerillas. It had been better than four hours since LCpl Chavez had stripped off his gear

and descended into the village below. Yahzee had stripped down to the barest combat essentials and shadowed Chavez to the outskirts of the village where he waited somewhere unseen.

Larkin knew that to hold this type of operation to a specific timetable was ridiculous, but he would feel a whole lot better when his two Lance Corporals were back inside their hasty perimeter. If something went wrong now they were both too far away for SSgt Larkin to provide any kind of covering fire and support. Time seemed to gnaw on the team as they waited.

Richard edged slowly to the corner of bushes and looked out across the empty street. Nothing moved in either direction but he did not trust the quiet. It had been quiet just before all hell broke loose at the food ration drop off station. When the Red Cross delivery truck ran out of food parcels and tried to drive off the hungry crowd suddenly went berserk and surged towards it. Richard had just received his allotment of a single bag of groceries when people started clawing at him and his bag of food. That was when the security guards opened up with their rifles and machine guns. Richard barely escaped as people began falling all around him. A fat lady fell against him penning him to the ground and probably saved him as round after round made the most sickening sound as hot metal met flesh.

“THAWACK – THAWACK – THAWACK – THAWACK!”

The night was suddenly filled with screaming people trying to desperately to escape the carnage. Richard finally managed to free himself from the mass of dead flesh that laid on top of him and grabbed the only thing remaining from the bag of groceries he had stood in line for over eight hours to receive. The bread was flattened and the outer wrapper stained with blood, but it was food. The crowd had left the immediate area, fleeing from the gunfire, and Richard saw an opening in the slaughter. Grabbing the bread he launched himself out of the hole like an Olympic athlete sprinting across the body-scattered parking lot in sheer terror. The guards didn't spot the fleeing computer programmer until the very last moment. He was only one person and fleeing while there were still thousands to contend with that waited hungrily just beyond the lights of the parking lot. One guard fired off two quick shots, just in case there were others in that direction that might try another rush on the security force. The shots went well wide of the fleeing man but he still managed to kick in the afterburners as a huge surge of adrenaline raced through his already panicked system.

Now he was but a few hundred yards from home and Colleen. But he might as well have been a hundred miles away. Fear gripped him as he tried to garner the courage to sprint across the street and into the awaiting darkness beyond.

After the umpteenth time he finally wound himself up and managed to jump out of

the bushes and onto the sidewalk. He had never felt so exposed before in his entire life. He hesitated one more time then dashed across the street and into the opening of the housing tract. Once inside he quickly looked back to see if he was being followed and was somewhat relieved when he could not hear or see anyone. But the fear would not leave him. He jogged on down the street as quietly as he could.

The streetlights were all out and had been that way for months. No lights shone in the dark windows of the houses that might as well have been mausoleums in a graveyard as most of the homes had been abandoned or housed their previous owners that had died of the plague. His part of the housing tract was still pretty much intact and had fared much better than the opposite section several streets over. The burnt remains of twenty or so houses were a reminder of their isolation and the seriousness of their situation. There were no services of any kind in this part of the city anymore.

Finally he was almost home and he slowed his jog to a brisk walk, trying to catch his breath and appear calm in the middle of the terror that he was feeling. Colleen didn't need this extra strain just now. Damn it for the bad timing! She still didn't show, but that didn't matter right now. Right now they had to figure out a way to get the hell out of here, but to where he didn't know. His folks were two states away and her folks clear over on the East coast, both would be impossible to reach under the current circumstances. There was just no way to get to either place. But to stay here was now becoming suicidal and what of their unborn baby, there had to be a better place to be than here, but where, and more importantly....how?

Someone was approaching. The FCT team hunkered down and prepared to receive whom ever was walking right into their midst.

A whispered voice called out. "Jelly".

And was quickly answered "Roll".

Yazhee and Chavez had returned. Only Chavez didn't look a bit like he had when he had walked down off the hill. His combat boots were tied together and hanging around his neck. In their place was a pair of flip-flops, the common footwear in this tropical part of the world. Combined with a pair of obviously non-regulation shorts and a stained wife-beater T-shirt he had liberated from someone's drying laundry his urban camouflage was complete.

"Well, what do you have for us, Chavez?" Sgt Stevens asked eyeing his Lance Corporals new duds.

The pair squatted down and began their debrief.

“There are a couple of likely candidates out there to choose from, Staff Sergeant. The big one on the end doesn’t look like its gone anywhere in a long time. There’s some fishing boats that could carry us all, but they were looking pretty ragged also. I’d doubt that they’d make it to the next island let alone all the way across the pond. Probably sink just beyond the reef if you ask me. But that double hulled one down on the other end looks like it just might be the ticket.”

“Why is that?” Larkin asked.

“Well it was sort of like Doc told me to look out for. It was just the way he described a cruising sailboat should look like. Lots of gear but all tied down and smart looking. Only one problem though.’

“And that would be?” Larkin asked.

“There’s a guard watching over it.” Chavez answered.

“Shit! A guard?”

“Yeah. We could take him out easy, he’s pretty sloppy. Not really paying any attention, just kicking back trying to look bad.” Chavez gave a street sign like a bad boy from the hood would make.

Yahzee now added his comments. “I think the owner is over in the local lock down.”

“How’s that?” Zipper asked.

“I could hear his dude yelling his lungs out from the back of one of the buildings. So I sort of scooted down and checked it out. Sounds like a Brit by his accent. He’s really pissed.”

“Did you happen to notice any flags on the twin hull Chavez?” Larkin asked.

“Hmmm there were a couple of different flags, but they weren’t from any countries I know. Sorry Staff Sergeant.”

For the next several minutes the pair went into detail about the village below and what the situation appeared to be there. Doc Nabors borrowed Larkin’s binos and took a long look for himself at their potential ride home. He recognized the design of the large catamaran that was tied up to the dock. He had even looked into building one for himself at one time. It was a Wharram. They had been around for a while. The designer was a bit of an old eccentric English sailor, but his design was a strong one based on the ancient Polynesian twin hulled voyaging canoes.

The one he was looking at right now appeared to be in the 35-40 foot capacity and with the identical upturned ends and was probably of the Pahi class. If that was true then they did indeed have a blue water sailing boat that could take them home.

“Were there any guerrillas in the village, anyone armed?”

“Just the local cop, no military types.” Chavez answered.

“But that is not to say that they might not be nearby.” Yahzee added.

Larkin walked up behind his Corpsman still eye balling the parked sailboat. “Well, Doc, do you think you can drive that barge?”

“Well, Staff Sergeant, if you want the truth.... I can probably crew that boat ok, but to skipper it...” He put down the binoculars and turned around to face his team leader. “Not if you want to get back home in one piece.”

“But I thought you said that you knew how to sail?”

“I do, but not something like that, and not across an ocean. Shit, there’s a whole lot of difference between day sailors on coastal boats and sailing in open blue water across oceans. This is way out of my league.”

“So, what now?” The Marine looked at his corpsman.

“I’d say we need that Australian dude they have locked up in the village brig.”

“Australian?”

“Well that is the national ensign that’s flying on the boat down there.” The Corpsman replied.

Richard had finally reached home; it had been a long and grueling day with little to show for all his effort. He slipped through the gate to the back yard and down the side of the house to the garage door. He got there mostly by feel because it was so dark in the narrow side yard between the houses. Fumbling with the lock he finally managed to get the key in the slot and swung the dead bolt free and quietly pushed the door in and disappeared into the inky darkness. Once he had closed the door and reset the dead bolt he pressed the little LED light on his key chain and made his way to the door leading through the utility room and on into the house.

Colleen was waiting there in the family room for him. A single solitary candle cast

a depressingly dim light in the large room, yet her warm smile stilled shined through the darkness that was hovering on the edge of the room. He wondered how it had come to this. Not so very long ago he had been on the top of his world. A premier programming job with a top rated computer firm. He had quickly risen to the top and garnered a six-figure salary. A new wife, a new house and all the toys that a twenty-second century suburbanite could have wished for and now...now there was nothing. All his toys and money were for naught. Today he risked his life for a single crushed loaf of Wonder Bread. His cupboards were nearly bare, his job gone, his bank closed, his life hanging by a thread, just himself and a pregnant wife stranded in the middle of a dying suburb.

She took one look at her husband and knew it had not gone well. They had been getting by on the weekly handouts from the Red Cross, but she knew that the time would soon come when that form of charity would also dry up. She placed her hand protectively on her unborn child and wondered just what sort of world she was bringing her baby into. They had not planned for children at this time, but nature would not be thwarted. Despite all her efforts, never missing a single pill, she had still become pregnant. She had never dreamed that their wonderful world would fall apart so quickly. It was bad enough when the Plague first hit and thousands were dying every day. Then Richard's job just closed their doors one day without a single word or a warning. Next the power became unpredictable and finally went out and shortly after that all the banks closed.

She was glad that Richard had put aside a few supplies back when the Y2K thing was the latest fear. But what little they had left of that was nearing its end, though they still did have several hundred pounds of wheat berries in the storage room under the stairs, for all the good it would do them without a means to grind them into flour. She had cried her last tear several weeks back. It would do no good and she knew it. Somehow she knew Richard would figure out a way out of this mess, he had to – for all their sakes.

She looked at the crushed loaf of bread and noted the dark stain on the white outer wrapper.

“What did you get on the wrapper dear?”

Richard looked at the dark blotch and answered flatly. “That's blood, dear. They ran out of food and the guards starting shooting the crowd.”

Colleen put her hand to her mouth. “Oh my God!” She exclaimed.

“Are you hurt – are you OK – oh my dear God, what is to become of us?”

He kneeled down and took her in his arms and the shaking began again. Together they held each other protectively and wept.

It was well after midnight and the village was out for the night, the last bar had finally closed and all its patrons staggered home. Across from the small police station SSgt Larking, his 249 gunner Sgt Stevens and both Lance Corporals Chavez and Yahzee watched from the shadows. Zipper, the radioman, and both Doc's were closing in on catamaran they had picked to make their escape. The guard at the boat landing was fast asleep in the deck chair next to the sailboat. Unfortunately his position blocked their access to the boat and since their approach was limited to the narrow floating wharf he would be difficult to sneak up on.

Cpl Zimmerman looked at his corpsman and gave him the signal. Nabors nodded and they both closed their right hands and began the age old tradition to pick which of them would go in the water to out flank the sleeping guard.

"One – Two – Three!" They whispered quietly.

Zipper froze his hand with his first two finger pointing out – Scissors! While the Doc's hand froze still in a fist – Rock!

"Shit, Doc, you beat me every time!"

"Here, give me your shit and go get wet." The Corpsman calmly replied with a big smile.

SSgt Stacy the Ranger Medical Specialist just looked on in amazement. A few seconds later the wiry Marine was letting himself down into the water and pulling himself carefully and silently along the edge of the floating dock.

"What the hell was all that?" She asked in a whisper.

"Well, someone had to get wet. How else would you choose?"

The Corpsman returned his attention to the sleeping guard.

Back up the road a lone figure in sandals, shorts and a wife-beater tee shirt walked into the tiny police station. The officer on duty was stacking Z's behind his desk when Chavez whipped his M-16 around and jammed it into the side of his face. The officer abruptly woke from his deep slumber and his eyes grew three sizes larger when he recognized the weapon shoved into his cheek. Quickly the rest of the team sprinted into the office and took up their positions. Chavez and Larkin pushed the disarmed and handcuffed police officer into the back of the stations towards the holding cells. There were only two men in residence, one a drunken Filipino and the other the target they had come for. Chavez herded the

confused cop into the cell as Larkin roused the sleeping Aussie, who was more than a little confused at the unexpected wake up call.

“You the owner of that big catamaran sailboat in the harbor?” Larkin asked quickly as he nudged the big Australian awake.

“Aye, that’s my boat! Just who the fuck are you, mate?”

“We’re your fan club, sailorman, and your escort the fuck out of here.”

“Well kiss my bloody arse, why didn’t you say so in the first place, Yank!”

With the guard bound, gagged and locked up in the Australian’s cell, the group exited the station house quickly and by leaps and bounds made their way through the sleeping village towards the marina. When they arrived they spotted the guard there in a secured in a similar situation tied to one of the pilings beside the catamarans moorings. All the lines had been cast off but one, which held big sailboat against the dock. The group quickly leapt aboard and Nabors cast off the last line. They were underway. The small outboard coughed to life and began pushing the big boat away from the dock as she slowly began to make her way out of the marina and towards open sea.

The Aussie was everywhere at once tying off this line, loosing up another, pulling here and there. By the time they cleared the break water the main sail billowed out and picked up the boats pace as it began to pull steadily away from land in the light chop.

Richard woke up first the next morning and disappeared into the garage. A few hours later Colleen noticed his absence and followed the noise. She found her husband feverishly pulling items down from the shelves and moving between piles of gear on the garage floor. The normally neat garage was a mess.

“What are you doing Rich?”

He suddenly stopped at her voice and looked up. “Something we should have done a long time ago Honey.”

She stepped down onto the cold concrete floor and looked over the various piles. “Richard, what is all this, hon?”

“We’re getting out of here, Colleen, we’re getting out of here now.”

“But where will we go? Both of our parents are too far away and we don’t have any travel passes, they won’t let us out of the city.”

"I've got an aunt that lives up north of here out in the country."

"But dear." She shook her head. "We don't even know if she's still alive and you heard the news just like me. There's no travel without the proper permits."

Richard turned suddenly angry, his voice changed to a tone that Colleen had never heard before.

"Colleen, we are getting out of here. We are getting out of here now, do you understand me?!"

The images of the night before were flashing through Richard's mind. Neither he nor his wife was going to end up bleeding out on an Albertson's parking lot over a loaf of bread. He didn't know how he was going to get to his Aunt Betty's place, but if there was a way he was going to find it. He was not going to wait for the government to get this shit fixed. He had no more faith in that resolution. It was time that he took matters into his own hands. He only hoped that he was not too late to correct his mistaken trust in the system. He picked up the only weapon he had, a spear gun. Well, it was a start.

Desert Doc