

The Living Will Envy The Dead
(A Story of Post-Nuclear War America)

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Cover Blurb

Ed Stalker had seen his fill of adventure after a life in the Marines and was content to be the small-town Sheriff of Ingalls, a town in West Virginia. Unfortunately for Ed's retirement plans, the long-feared war with Russia turns nuclear and the United States comes under nuclear attack. Trapped in the post-nuclear world, Ed and his town must struggle to survive, facing refugees, bandits, religious fanatics and hard decisions to ensure that some remnant of the United States remains intact...

Author's Note

The town of Ingalls, West Virginia, does not exist. Probably. For obvious reasons, I have played around with the geography and suchlike for the story. Anyone using this as a guide to Virginia is likely to end up in Texas. Don't say I didn't warn you.

This book is dedicated to the real Edward Stalker and Robert C. McClelland III, barflies of long standing, for their help with the story. Thanks, guys.

I

*The moving sun-shapes on the spray,
The sparkles where the brook was flowing,
Pink faces, plightings, moonlit May,
These were the things we wished would stay;
But they were going.*

II

*Seasons of blankness as of snow,
The silent bleed of a world decaying,
The moan of multitudes in woe,
These were the things we wished would go;
But they were staying.*

III

*Then we looked closelier at Time,
And saw his ghostly arms revolving
To sweep off woeful things with prime,
Things sinister with things sublime
Alike dissolving.*

(Thomas Hardy - Going and Staying.)

Prologue

There are many tales from the Final War and its aftermath that have been told, in books and movies and even face to face. The tale of Mike Harmon, of Georgia, is still a thrilling story for Americans. The stories about Patrick Hessessy, who led post-war recovery efforts in Panama, remain important to us today. There are hundreds of such stories, the lives of people who stepped forward to rebuild our country after the war, and yet, so many of them are deconstructed. Edward Stalker is one such person.

He is, and remains, one of the most controversial figures in recent history. He has his friends and admirers who will not say or hear a word against him. He has won the grudging respect of others who would not normally have a kind word for the military. He is hated and loathed by many others, including some of the people who worked with him in Ingalls after the war. The stories about him – and he really did do most of what they said he did – have grown in the telling, but they are nothing, but bare facts. The detractors are free to put what spin on them they like.

The book you hold in your hand was written, at my request, by Ed himself. I found it hard to convince him that it was worth the effort of writing it, although I was surprised to discover that I had the support of several members of Ed's family in my efforts. The story covers the post-war world as he saw it, written in hindsight. Ed himself has asked me to make clear that he may have forgotten details, or altered his reasoning later, but it is the best that he could do. I have not altered details, with a handful of exceptions, mainly factual details relating to events outside Ed's area of operations. You may like Ed, or you may grow to hate him, but he was a product of his time and he did what he thought he had to do.

Not an angel, or a devil, but a man.

Keith A. Glass
MG U.S.M.C. (Retired)
2050

Chapter One

No Better Friend, No Worse Enemy.

-Motto, 1st Marine Division

I wasn't going to write this book.

Not, I should say right from the start, because I was afraid. My life is a matter of public record. There is very little dispute over *what* I did, perhaps not even over the *why*. No, I didn't want to write the book because I didn't feel that I had the right to tell the story. It is not, after all, just *my* story, but that of everyone who lived in Ingalls and contributed to the 2nd Reconstruction. Had I not been asked to tell the story, to write this book, I would have been happy to leave the past where it belongs, in the past.

But then, those who do not learn from the past are condemned to repeat it.

This story is, as might be expected, me-centred. Certain details have been obscured to protect others still alive. There are a few omissions, a few details that I believed at the time but later found to be incorrect, and not a few barefaced lies. I leave those as an exercise for the reader, as most of them will be easy to pick out from the narrative, an echo of exercises we had to do while in Boot Camp. They should provide an interesting challenge.

And where, exactly, should I start?

I was born in New York to Rupert Stalker and Mary Tam, who named me Edward Christopher Stalker. Most people just call me Ed. Rupert, my father, was a soldier who was, officially, a cook. Mom always found that hilarious. My father couldn't cook to save his own life! Had he been in charge of cooking for thousands of hungry soldiers, he would have been lynched, assuming his victims survived the mass food poisoning. Dad was, as it turned out, a soldier who served in the Special Forces, fighting the twilight wars that no one was supposed to know about. It says something about the general level of attention paid to security in those days that too many of the details were known to just about anyone with an incentive to go looking. Dad went after terrorist cells in places that would have surprised the average American citizen, hunted drug smugglers in Central America, advised several tin-pot African governments on protecting themselves against their own ambitious subordinates and hundreds of other missions. I saw him, on average, about every six months. It still surprises me that Mom and Dad actually managed to have a life together, let alone raise four kids.

Mom might have stayed at home, but she was no shrinking violet. My father's salary was enough to pay for us four kids – or brats, as we were in those days – but it wasn't enough for her. She worked part time to pay for additional stuff she wanted, mainly for us, while bringing us all up in the best of manners. She was our mother, our confidant, and our disciplinarian. She was a fine woman and they don't make them like that any more. God alone knows what happened to her – chances are, if you don't know what happened to someone years after the Final War, they're dead – but I miss her dreadfully. She kept us all going through some bad times. It was her who held the family together.

And then there was Uncle Billy. He wasn't really our Uncle in the family sense, but he was an old friend of Dad's who'd come to live in New York after – according to the official story – suffering a slight accident that had left him limping more or less permanently. Yeah, right.

I saw his back once or twice, when he took us hiking or mountaineering, and it was covered in scars. He might have been handsome, once, but his skin looked as if someone had whipped him badly and then given him nothing in the way of medical care. Uncle Billy had been a British citizen, a Royal Marine, but he'd moved permanently to New York. I had the feeling that it wouldn't have been safe for him to return home, although he could just have been bullshitting me, something he did from time to time. I still remember, with a shudder, him giving me instructions and forcing me to figure out what was wrong with them.

It was Uncle Billy who taught me how to fight. I'd been in school for three years before I ran into Moe, a classic locker-room jerk. You probably know the type; rough, unpleasant to anyone he can get away with being unpleasant to, and a bully. He demanded my lunch money. I replied by punching him as hard as I could, but I lost the ensuing fight and had, to add insult to injury, a detention for fighting. When I got home – after the lecture from Mom on the subject of fighting – Uncle Billy started to teach me unarmed combat. The Royal Marines didn't know the meaning of the word 'fair' and some of the tricks he taught me would have had me thrown out of the boxing ring and disgraced. I didn't have any intention of becoming a boxer, but the next time I met Moe, I won the fight and beat the crap out of him. I got another detention, but so what?

That pretty much set the tone for the next few years at school. I was a fairly isolated child, despite the attention of several girls, of whom more later. I wasn't particularly interested in sports, although I enjoyed playing football and basketball for fun, and I resisted all pressure to join the football team. It gave me a certain kind of pleasure to know that I was better at it than the team members the school fielded for championships, but it wasn't that important to me. The football jocks might have been the cream of the crop, but they were bastards to me, as far as I was concerned. I wouldn't have willingly spent more than a few minutes in their presence without being paid. I went on survival courses, joined the mountaineering team – the team leader, by the way, knew less than I did, thanks to Uncle Billy – and learned to play Chess. What can I say? I was young, and unformed, and I didn't have the slightest idea what I wanted to do with my life.

And then came the day – or one of the days – that lives in infamy.

Look, we were stupid back then, ok? It seems awfully silly to rank a minor terrorist attack as something that changed the world, but we were young and innocent, and we hadn't fought the Final War. 9/11 changed the world, as far as we were concerned, just as I turned sixteen. The country was at war, everyone was *sure* that the next major terrorist attack was just around the corner, and I wanted to serve my country. I remembered Dad's years of faithful service, and how my mother had waited for him to come home, and I wanted to follow in his footsteps. Maybe not literally – I didn't want people thinking that I was a cook, or a deadbeat dad – but I wanted to serve.

And, because I'd been more influenced by Uncle Billy than I liked to admit, I joined the Marines.

I'd like to tell you that I aced my way through the training course and the dreaded Crucible. It would be an utter lie. Nothing in my life, not even Uncle Billy's patented March of Death, came close to Marine training. The Drill Sergeant worked us all to death and flogged us onwards, further than we had believed possible, breaking us down and reshaping us into Marines. It was a good thing that I wasn't particularly vain, or I would probably have cried at

the haircut; I looked ghastly. They pounded us and pounded us until we were at the verge of quitting, pushed us through hell...and then finally served us steak and eggs before declaring us United States Marines. I have never been prouder of myself than at that moment.

One thing led to another and I soon found myself assigned to the 1st Marine Division, which was on its way to Iraq. I was assigned to Regimental Combat Team (RCT) Seven, 1st Battalion, 7th Marines, commanded by a Lieutenant-Colonel. The Lieutenant-Colonel and his subordinates managed to conceal their *huge* delight at seeing me in the midst of all the preparations for war. We were going into Iraq, all the way to Baghdad, and God help the bastards who got in our way. We trained, and exercised, and went through hours upon hours of live-fire targeting practice, just to ensure that we were ready. The difference between a soldier, of which Iraq had very few, and a thug, of which Iraq had a great number, lies in training and discipline. Iraqi training tended towards the “point *this* end towards the enemy, don’t look back and don’t run, or you will be shot” style. As you can imagine, thousands of Iraqis surrendered rather easily when the shooting finally started, although the war wasn’t the cakewalk it was supposed to have been. Long story there, covered elsewhere.

I don’t want to admit it, but I was scared. The closest I had come to combat action before was fighting Moe, and doing some hunting with Uncle Billy, and neither of them were anything like *real* fighting. Moe had been a coward – most bullies are cowards; hit them hard enough and they will fold – and dissuading him from picking on me had been easy, once I had prepared. The hunting trips had been fun, but the animals didn’t shoot back...and, indeed, I had never been under fire before. How would I cope, I wondered, when the shit *really* hit the fan?

We moved out and advanced into Iraq. We took the oil refineries before the Iraqis could blow them, although several sensible Iraqis had decided that blowing them would...not be in the country’s best interests. I was relieved, despite myself, but Ambush Alley soon cured me of pre-combat jitters. You know those pictures of Marines advancing into An Nasiriyah? One of them was me.

If nothing else – slight digression here – Ambush Alley showed the importance of training and exercises. The famed – it should be infamous - 507th Maintenance Company, which included the famed Jessica Lynch, failed its combat test rather spectacularly, although their Iraqi opponents didn’t do much better either. They hadn’t been trained properly and hadn’t been under fire before. Worse, an A-10 made a serious mistake in the heat of battle and strafed a company of Marines north of the Saddam Canal. They hadn’t been trained enough either, although one of the oldest jokes in the book covers precision weapons and friendly fire – they’re not.

I won’t go through the campaign in blow-by-blow detail. We pushed north, getting more and more hacked off at the Iraqis as we moved, and eventually reached Baghdad. There were plenty of Iraqis who decided to fight, either through stubbornness, or through having a secret policeman holding a gun at their backs, forcing them onwards to death. We found that if we located and shot the secret policeman, the Iraqis attacking us tended to surrender or to try to run. Others, however, fought almost professionally. They had balls, all right. The worst of all were the foreign fighters who came into Iraq in hopes of killing an American. We killed them by the thousand and the locals refused to bury them, a gesture of contempt for fellow Muslims. We had to bury them ourselves.

I spent the next two years, by and large, on counterinsurgency duty. I didn't know at the time – no one did – that the early years of the Occupation would be so badly mismanaged. Remember what I said about some Iraqis having balls? The men we needed, the ones who could have helped rebuild their country, were tossed out onto the streets when we disbanded the army. There are so few things in life I want, but one thing I do want is ten minutes alone with the moron who convinced the President that it would be a good idea. It wasn't. Oh, I do understand the political factors involved, but the bottom line was that it was a fucking stupid trade-off and one that cost American lives. I fought in more tiny little encounters than I like to admit, and several really big fights like Fallujah...and then I was wounded. I hadn't escaped unscathed during the previous years, but this time...the IED exploded under my vehicle and when I awoke, I was being evacuated back to the States. It was pretty bad.

On the other hand, that's where I met Mac. They operated on me as soon as they could, before shipping me into a hospital to recover, basically just pointing me to a bed. I didn't mind. I'd several years worth of sleep to catch up on, even if I did feel like I'd gone ten rounds with the Corps fighting champion. I climbed into the bed, lay down, and sometime later was awoken by a voice.

"Jesus Christ," it said. "They've brought us the Doctor!"

I opened one eye and glared at the speaker. All right, I did look a bit like David Tennant – who had been the Doctor for two years when I was wounded – but there was no call for something like that.

"And who are you meant to be?" I demanded. Mac - Robert McNab, to give him his full name – was a short ugly sparkplug. I'd call him worse, were it not for the fact that he is proofreading this book. "Mike O'Neal?"

He laughed and a beautiful friendship was formed. Mac was an Army Ranger who'd just been returned ahead of time from Afghanistan. Like me, he loved science-fiction and military history, while he introduced me to other kinds of fiction, including fantasy and alternate history. We spent many happy hours chatting away while they tried to nurse us back to health and, once we were allowed out of the hospital, we painted the town red together. I'd love to tell you some of the stories, but as I said, Mac's proofreading this. I'll leave everything we did to your imagination.

As it happened, both of us were too badly wounded to return to combat at once, although Mac would and did recover fully. I don't mean that we were walking around with a broken leg or some other such nonsense, but we were no longer at the peak of physical fitness. That wasn't actually a problem and so we found ourselves being dragged into advisory roles. We had actually been in combat and had seen the elephant...and we were perfect to tell some civilians just what was wrong with their war-winning gadget. They didn't have a fucking clue!

No, I don't mean that they were bad people; I mean that they didn't have the slightest idea of what real combat entailed. There was a firm, headed by this really hot babe – and boy, do I mean *hot* – which had come up with the perfect camouflage suit. It might not have been the Predator's perfect cloaking device, but a soldier could wear it and he would be invisible. He would also be dead. It worked fine in the lab, but in the field the temperature just kept rising.

Back to the drawing board, we said, and we made it stick. I don't know how we got away with it.

One thing led to another, again, and we found ourselves working on all kinds of committees. The military has to be a planner. Every so often, the media will 'discover' that the military has a plan to invade...well, insert your favourite enemy country here. They missed the point, of course. The Pentagon is supposed to have a plan for anything that they might be called upon to do. There was no sign of hostile intent in coming up with the plans. As you might imagine, they missed that point as well. We worked on nuclear war plans – more on that later – disaster recovery plans and pretty much every kind of contingency that you could imagine. Would you believe, really, that they even had a plan for alien invasion? They did.

Some of the scenarios were truly depressing. There were some for expected civil wars in 2000, and again in 2008. I hadn't believed that either would have been likely, although there were moments before both elections when violence loomed its ugly head. I even studied a book covering a civil war against an evil President and found myself wondering, grimly, where I would stand if it really came down to blows. We had all kinds of interesting debates on the subject. I might even have convinced a few civilians that I wasn't an asshole...and nor were the rest of the Corps.

But I didn't know what to do with myself. Don't misunderstand. I was enjoying some of what Mac and I were doing, but it wasn't what I'd signed up to do. What good is a Marine with a punctured lung? The RCT had moved on without me, most of my friends had been promoted or had left the Corps – or had been killed, in a handful of cases – and I had been left behind. I spent a year as an MP in Afghanistan, but that wasn't really me, somehow. It was Mac who suggested the solution, in the end, and who pulled strings on my behalf. The town of Ingalls needed a sheriff and I, a Marine, was an ideal choice. The people in smaller towns tend to be more patriotic – it may be because they know more soldiers, proportionally speaking – and besides, Mac's family had lived there for generations. I wasn't sure, at first, but hell, it sounded like a change. I moved out, settled in, learned the ropes, met the people and ended up enjoying myself...

And then came the war.

Chapter Two

A nuclear war could ruin your whole day.

-Anon

I wasn't there at the time.

That should be obvious. I wasn't the President of America, or the President of Russia, or one of the other world leaders during the years before the war. I wasn't making decisions on a strategic level. I might have been working on operational plans, but I never actually had to put one of them into use...and I certainly never ordered that any of them were to be used. I can only tell you what I saw at the time, from the outside, and what was pieced together later, sometimes much later. The general level of devastation caused by the Final War saw to that.

This is the story as I understand it. There are already people who disagree with my basic outline, but you can look them up on your own. This is the story of the year the world decided to have a damn good try at committing suicide. Even now, years after the fact, I still get angry every time I think about it. Those fucking idiots in the White House, and the Kremlin, and Ten Downing Street, and every other governmental building in what we liked to call the First World, made pretty much every dumb mistake in the book. When nuclear weapons are involved...oh, I could stand them all up against the wall and pull the trigger, were it not that that would be too kind.

Anyway...

Let me start by pointing out something that should be obvious, so naturally no politician grasped the point. An American soldier at Point A is not at Point B. That should be fairly understandable. A man cannot be in two places at once. What does that mean, you might ask, for the war? Simple; a Brigade Combat Team – or whatever – that was in Iraq was not in America, or Poland, or Germany, or Japan, or Korea, or wherever else we might want to have a BCT. We actually saw this problem on a smaller scale in Iraq. The country was about the size of Texas and, at first, we just didn't have the manpower to cover everywhere we *needed* to cover. It didn't help that we didn't realise how many places we *had* to cover, but I digress. The bottom line was that every American soldier who went to Iraq was an American soldier who could not be used elsewhere.

Now, the United States, before the Final War, was the most powerful nation in the world. We had the most powerful geopolitical position in history. We had a navy that out-massed every other navy put together. We had an air force that could shoot all of our possible competitors out of the sky without breaking a sweat. We might not have had the largest army in the world – I think that that was the Chinese, although some of the other communist states had much larger percentages of their population in uniform, or in the reserves – but we had the most powerful army in the world. It took us twenty-one days to destroy Saddam's regime. That is almost unprecedented in the history of modern warfare.

What we *weren't* was all-powerful. Remember what I said about that American soldier? Use him in one place, can't use him elsewhere? That held as true for us as it does for anyone else. We might have been powerful, but our concentration on Iraq meant that other powers could start to get on with their own plans, because they *knew* that we could do nothing to stop them, but political hot air. NATO was little more than a talking house and had been ever since the

end of the Cold War. We had obligations that we couldn't meet, obligations that we didn't have the forces to meet, or the position. We were riding for a fall.

And the Russians gave one to us. They used to rule half of Europe after the Second World War. They were in control of Poland, East Germany, Czechoslovakia and a dozen other countries, some that had once had an independent existence, others formed out of the ruins of the so-called Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. It might have been a Union, but it wasn't Soviet, Socialist or remotely Republican. It was a prison camp for half of Europe and a deadly menace to the rest. It fell apart, largely because communists make lousy planners – poor or even falsified feedback – and we declared victory. Why not? We'd won the Cold War without fighting.

The Russians didn't see it that way. They hit rock bottom during the Clinton years and started to climb back up again. They pushed through an entire series of reforms that started to rebuild their economy, and then they started to rebuild their military. They were still the only serious threat to America's existence, but we didn't take them seriously any longer. They might have produced a few impressive pieces of kit, but most of their technology might as well be used as scrap iron. In 2001, after 9/11, the Russians realised that they were in a stronger position than they had thought. We – the USA – needed them, and they didn't need us. They grew more confident, started to pull their former satellites back into their orbit, and invaded Georgia. There's a ton of crap written about that war, most of it completely missing the point, but the writing on the wall was that the Russians were back. They had kicked the shit out of the Georgians...and NATO had done nothing. NATO *could* do nothing. The Russians were back in Eastern Europe.

We needed them, desperately, to assist us. Pakistan was falling into chaos. We needed supply lines through Russian-controlled areas to supply our forces in Afghanistan. We needed them to stop fucking about with Iran. The Russians had no problems with either of them – they regarded the Iranians with the same kind of attitude that the KKK has for the NAACP – but nothing comes for nothing in this world. They would give us what we wanted, for a price, and that price was effectively selling out Eastern Europe. Our new and inexperienced President effectively took the deal...and, in the absence of clear support from Washington, Western Europe followed suit.

Look, I'm not defending them, but I understand their position. During the Cold War, Western Europe was terrified that there would be a nuclear war, fought in Europe. Victory would be meaningless if it meant the complete devastation of Europe, as far as they were concerned, and so they had the twin priorities of defending against the Soviets and restraining us. They couldn't stand up to the USSR on their own, so they needed us, but they couldn't survive a nuclear war either. Matters only got worse as Putin started exporting larger amounts of Russian energy to the West. All of a sudden, resistance to the Russians meant European citizens freezing in the cold. How much resistance do you think the Russians faced?

Anyway...we had effectively won in Iraq, if only for certain values of 'won' and were pulling back, when the Russians made their move. They had always hated the presence of American BMD systems on Polish soil. They might not have been a threat to the vast Russian arsenal of ballistic missiles, but they resented them, just as we had back during the Cuban Missile Crisis. The Russians had already taken over the Ukraine and Belarus – oh, they'd learned; there was far less direct rule from Moscow, but when Moscow said 'bend

over,' they bent over and took it – and they had forces right on Poland's border, glaring towards Warsaw. They told the Poles to evict us, or else. The Poles screamed to Washington, Brussels and the UN.

The UN did fuck-all, of course. It had no army and, in any case, the Russians had a veto. Brussels dithered. The last thing the morons there wanted was something that would disturb them from leeching as much as they could from the European Union before it collapsed under its own weight. Washington didn't blink. All of a sudden, the BMD system was a vital American interest again...which kind of makes you wonder why we hadn't bothered with some other precautions, like stationing a division or two in Poland to protect it. They flew in an Airborne unit and started to deploy more American troops to Europe.

Now, *that* was a fuck-up. Don't get me wrong. The Airborne soldiers are as good as they get, but they don't have much in the way of heavy equipment. They were a speed-bump, just as they had been a speed-bump in Saudi Arabia in 1991, and if they had been challenged, they would probably have been annihilated. Oh, they'd have taken a bite out of the Russians, but they would have been lost, for nothing. The President was twisting arms and using everything he could to get a large American force into Poland, but the EU was playing games. They thought that the President would posture a bit and then withdraw, or back down, and they didn't want to be associated with it. Hell, I can't blame them for that. I thought the same. The idiot in the White House genuinely believed that a small army was a good idea, but how could we carry out his foreign policy ideas without a bigger army? We were in the midst of a build-up when the balloon went up.

The Russians launched a campaign of *maskirovka*. This is something the Russians are very good at and we're very bad at, mainly because of our tradition of a free press. They launched a smear campaign to brand the Poles warmongers and set off a series of 'incidents' to convince the world that the Poles had started a war. The fighting got rapidly out of control, just as the Russians had intended, and the Poles were getting the worst of it. God knows what happened to the Airborne soldiers, but I wouldn't put money on it being anything good. Europe convulsed as Russian commandos started to cause havoc, while anti-war protests appeared everywhere – no one traced all of the funding, but I'd bet good money that it came from Russia – and riots appeared on the streets. They knew that they were under attack, of course, but at the same time, no one was quite sure what was going on.

Now, I'm going to digress here. We view other countries as being monolithic, governed by a single will, and those countries are either with us or against us. Iran? Bad country, bad people, bad government...enemy. Saudi Arabia? Good country, good government, good people...friend. Boy, did we get *that* one wrong or what? We're wrong, of course. The lesson we should have drawn from Iraq regarding Europe was that if supporting the US is a vote-loser, politicians in Europe – or wherever – won't support the US. Not out of malice, but out of simple political survival. They were politicians. What did you expect, really?

Anyway, back to the war. Germany and France mobilised and suddenly they couldn't do enough for us. NATO was starting to look like a working prospect again, with a mass army facing the Russians, who had overrun nearly half of Poland by that time. The two forces met in Western Poland, where Hitler had suffered his greatest defeat, and struggled for days before the Russian offensive was finally blunted. The Russians had played their cards and lost.

Or so it seemed. It turned out that hardliners in the Russian Government were absolutely determined not to suck up any more humiliation. They'd been marginalized after the Cold War and were determined not to suffer that again. There was a brief gun-battle in the Kremlin and the hardliners were firmly in control. They deployed tactical nukes and, in four explosions, inflicted more damage on us – and the Europeans – than anyone had taken since the Korean War. We struck back, of course, launching our own tactical nukes...and the blasts started to move steadily westwards and eastwards. The Russians, by this point, were getting a little desperate. They'd hoped to force us to back down. We hadn't blinked. Perhaps, in hindsight, we should have blinked, but we didn't. They struck and we struck back. They deployed tactical nukes mounted on cruise missiles against our carriers, sinking several. We struck back by destroying their ports. They...

They fired on Paris. I think they saw the French Government as the weak link in the NATO chain and they might have had a point. The French had too many problems with rioting youths – politically correct codeword for Muslim youths – and really didn't want the war. The Russians hit Paris with a nuke. The French struck back by targeting Moscow and then...it was Katy bar the door. Everyone was shooting at everyone else. We were going into some of the 'never even think about using' war plans and targeting Russian industry, military bases deep within the former USSR and even their population. *They* were doing the same to us, and Europe. Oh, and they did the same to China as well. The Russians had always bought into the 'Yellow Peril' concept, but more on that later. The President ordered mass retaliation and we launched almost everything we had towards the Russians...

And we weren't the only ones. Israel had been watching the war closely and they *knew* that we were going to be down and out for at least a decade. Israel needed us to survive. The core problem of the entire Israeli-Palestinian dispute was that one side's minimum demands were larger than the other side could reasonably accept. Israel was smaller than just about every US state and *they* couldn't think about giving up territory without cast-iron guarantees. The Arabs, for domestic political reasons, couldn't and wouldn't give them such guarantees. Israel knew that we were going down and they opened fire. They destroyed almost every Middle Eastern city within range; Tehran, Baghdad, Cairo and others. The mass slaughter lasted barely a day, but by the time it finished, the population was a bare shadow of what it had been.

And the *Chinese* were getting into the game. They saw the Russian launch and fired back themselves. That triggered off the Second and Final Korean War. North Korea launched against South Korea, Japan and, for good measure, Guam. The Japanese downed three out of the nine missiles the Koreans launched, but they still lost five cities to nuclear blasts. The sixth missile failed to detonate. Japan launched back as the country convulsed; it turned out that Japan had secretly been stockpiling nukes ever since President Clinton fled Somalia. It was very secret. I don't recall hearing anything about it until after the war. China panicked – they'd taken hits themselves from the Russians – and fired on Japan and Taiwan. It turned out that the *Taiwanese* had nukes too...and they shot back. They were also incredibly lucky. There was a pair of *Ticonderoga*-class guided-missile cruisers in the area and all, but one of the Chinese missiles was downed. (The Chinese had thrown their main force against Russia, which I always thought was a little pointless, but the Chinese hadn't known that at the time.) North Korea's mass offensive into the south made incredible headway during the first few days, and then stalled badly as the effect of the nukes started to take its toll. The entire country came apart.

And then the Indians got into the game. They'd made a secret agreement with us that we would provide security for the Pakistani nukes, in exchange for not shooting the shit out of Pakistan after numerous terrorist attacks. They panicked and started rattling the sabre at Pakistan. The Pakistanis panicked in turn and rushed to full alert. Some idiot fired a missile – records aren't clear on who and it hardly matters now – and both sides opened up with everything they had. Pakistan was devastated from end to end, blown right back into a nasty radioactive stone age. Mac, who served in Afghanistan, says that they probably didn't notice. I thought that that was a sick joke. India got off lightly, compared to Pakistan, but they lost several cities and plenty of good army units under mushroom clouds. The entire country came apart at the seams when radioactivity entered the Ganges. The poor and dispossessed were spreading disease everywhere. I think they lost two thirds of their population in the first year after the war.

I think the only people who got off lightly were the Australians. They didn't get nuked directly. I'm not sure why; maybe the Russians simply didn't care enough to target them, or maybe we knocked out their Australia-targeted missiles before they were fired. There's no way to know their reasoning now, unless we find some charred documents in the ruins of the Kremlin, but it hardly matters. Australia was an oasis of civilisation in a desert of fire and suffering. South America came out of the war all right, apart from Argentina and Venezuela. Venezuela decided to get involved in the war and did plenty of sabre-rattling, just enough to panic the President, who ordered them nuked. By this point, they were tossing them around as if they were firecrackers. The Argentineans tried to make another move on the Falklands and the British struck them, hard. They ended up being assimilated into Brazil. So did the Falklands.

And that, in short, was the story of the Final War. I don't know *what* happened to the President. I've heard hundreds of different stories; some say that he remained at the White House until the end, others say that Air Force One was blown out of the air by Russian nukes, or even jet fighters, as impossible as that would seem, or perhaps something even worse. I don't know and I don't care. We haven't had a great President since Reagan.

I just hope that the bastard is frying in hell.

Chapter Three

*There was a turtle by the name of Bert
And Bert the turtle was very alert;
When danger threatened him he never got hurt,
He knew just what to do...*
-Duck and Cover (US Civil Defence Film, 1951)

If you think that the above sounds stupid, you're partly correct. More on that later.

"Ed," Mac said, "the Mayor is dead."

I wasn't entirely surprised. The Mayor of Ingalls, elected by his citizens, had made the fatal mistake of sending his family away from home to visit friends in Washington, which we had heard, an hour ago, had been hit by a nuclear weapon. Or perhaps two or three weapons. What was left of the Internet wasn't being as helpful as we had hoped, while the Emergency Broadcast System seemed to have collapsed completely. I wasn't entirely surprised about that either. They always left out the fucking emergency when they ran the drills.

"It was definitely suicide," Mac continued, when I showed no signs of interest. New York had been hit, perhaps badly. My family might have been killed. My sister had married a soldier and gone to live in the countryside somewhere, so she might be alive, but what about the rest of them? What about Uncle Billy? "We found a pistol in his hand and..."

"Tag and bag the body," I said, automatically. For only the second time in my life, since becoming an adult, I had the feeling that events were slipping out of control. The first time, back during the early insurgency in Iraq, hadn't been as bad as this, not when cities seemed to be burning everywhere. I felt numb, cold and dead inside. It hadn't caught up with me yet. "I take it we've heard nothing from FEMA?"

Mac shook his head glumly. We were occupying the Federal Emergency Management Agency's official Command Post, situated under the local library, a massive building that wouldn't have been out of place in a city. Mac's family had gifted it to Ingalls, probably as a tax write-off, and their reading tastes dictated a lot of the volumes on the shelves. He'd told me that he'd taken shameless advantage of it when he'd been growing up, with the net result that thrillers, fantasy and right-wing power books competed uneasily for shelving. They also had a fairly good history section. I'd been in colleges that were less well supplied.

"No," he said. For a moment, he seemed to wilt. "Ed, what are we going to do?"

I said nothing, thinking hard. Normally, we would have had the FEMA Director here to tell us what to do – or at least try to tell us what to do. As the local sheriff, and a former Marine with real combat experience, I had had a tendency to take over as much as possible, partly because I didn't trust the Director. He might have had a fancy degree in Crisis Management – whatever that meant – but a single word of complaint from Ingalls could have ruined him. Predictably, he hadn't even tried to take the lead on the handful of exercises we had run.

And we were in real trouble. I knew that from the start. The satellites were going down – either through EMP or Russian ASAT weapons – and we'd lost most of our landlines to various federal facilities. I should have been able to pick up the phone and call a dozen

bases, but they were all offline. I wanted to believe that the phone network, as hardened and attack-proof as it was supposed to be, had been disabled somehow, but I couldn't allow myself to take refuge in fantasy. The odds were very good that the bases had been hit and destroyed.

Fallout, I thought suddenly, recalling all of the war plans I had seen back when Mac and I had been 'advising' the planners. *Fallout, refugees, panic, food riots...shit.*

I looked up at him. He was lucky, I reflected, in a moment of jealous amusement. His family and girlfriend were all within the general area surrounding Ingalls. They hadn't been nuked, or we would have seen the blast; hell, it might well have been the last thing we'd seen before being blown to smithereens. My family was in New York...and at the moment, they might as well be on the other side of the Moon. The predictions for even a limited nuclear war – and we'd also learned that when one missile flew, the odds were good that they would all fly – were hellish. We were going to go through hell.

"Mac," I said, quietly, "we're on our own."

He didn't bother to dispute it. He knew the projections as well as I did. "Yes," he said. He leaned closer to me. I could smell the cigarette smoke on his breath. "Ed, you're the sheriff. At the moment, you're pretty much the boss. What do you want done?"

I winced. Mac had only been passing through Ingalls when the war started, restlessly wandering around the countryside. I think he missed being a soldier more than I did, even though he was on the reserve list, and he volunteered for anything that even smacked of soldiering. It might have been my idea to have the Jail Posse, but it was Mac who was the 'unit's' nominal commander and supervisor. The thought of the Jail Posse reminded me of something else, something I had been avoiding thinking about.

"We implement the GOTH plan," I said, with more confidence than I felt. The GOTH plan – the Go TO Hell plan – had been something that I had designed in my head, but never really committed to paper. I hadn't wanted to worry people in the town by considering apocalyptic disaster, even though I'd been taught to consider every possible location in terms of how it could serve war. Ingalls wasn't too badly placed to be defended...and God knew we were going to need it. "Mac, call the deputies and get them to call out the Jail Posse, and the National Guardsmen. We're going to need them."

I scowled as Mac leapt to obey. Ingalls, like many small towns, had a National Guard Armoury and a Company of National Guardsmen. They'd been placed on alert, but several of them had been called out of the town and sent to Europe. There were fifty of them left, if I recalled correctly, mostly the combat support sections. They might have made riflemen, but they were mainly REMFs. Some of the veterans in the town were reservists and could be called up for service, or as part of the Jail Posse, but all of them were in their homes. The Federal Government, before the communications links had collapsed completely, had ordered a general curfew all over America – I think they were losing touch with reality at that point – and most people in Ingalls were obeying. It was a quiet law-abiding town, most of the time, although I think the real reason was because people were scared of fallout. The panic would start tomorrow. I was morbidly certain of it.

The ground shook faintly. I was pretty sure that that was a nuke. I'd gone to the roof of the library and peered east, but all I'd seen had been a handful of flashes of light in the distance. The sky had been glowing, as if the world beyond the horizon was a burning wall of flame, but the Geiger counters had barely buzzed. There wasn't time for the fallout to make its way to Ingalls. Not yet. I took one final look at the dead communications set, wondering if it would ever work again, and walked up the stairs into the lobby. It would not have been out of place in Buckingham Palace. Mac's family have many virtues, but good taste is not one of them.

My deputies snapped to attention as I entered. It's hard to keep good people in a small town like Ingalls. Most of them serve with us for a short period, and then head off to the big city, where promotion comes faster. I might have stepped into the shoes of the last sheriff, who had been caught with his hand in the till, but I'd already decided that Ingalls was my home. *They* wanted to see the lights and excitement of the bigger cities. Personally, I thought they were mad, but what did I know.

"All right, we're in serious shit," I said, without preamble. It had been too long since we'd held any kind of real drill...and the last one we'd held had been thoroughly fucked up by FEMA. Not intentionally, I think, but once again...they forgot the emergency. "The Mayor is dead" – I saw their faces slump and winced internally – "and we have no communication with the Feds. We're on our own."

Their faces were a study in contrasts. Deputy Rose Wilder, my second in command, looked pale. She'd only stayed as long as she had in Ingalls because I had requested it and she felt bound to me. It wasn't a sexual thing, but something between two people who had shared danger together. Deputy Jason Robertson and Deputy Andrew McClellan, both young men who had been intending to move on in the fall, looked excited. They hadn't grasped the truth yet. Deputy Jackson King, a massive black man with a surprisingly gentle touch, looked ghastly. He'd grown up in Atlanta, and Atlanta was on the list of cities that had been confirmed destroyed. And Deputy Deborah Ivey...

She looked as she always looked, a woman old enough to be a grandmother and yet always calm and composed. She'd been a Deputy for over fifteen years, and had yet never sought the position of sheriff. I hadn't understood why at first – in my experience, someone will always be promoted unless there is something seriously wrong with them – but Deborah simply liked to help people. She was a surprisingly fearsome opponent as well. There were few people in the town who would seriously consider crossing her. Everyone pretty much worshipped her.

"We have a lot to do and not much time to do it in," I continued. I unrolled the map and laid it out on the ground. "Jackson, Jason and Andrew, I'm going to need you to take command of the Jail Posse, once its formed. You will each take a section and take them here, here and here."

I pointed down to three locations on the map. Ingalls sits inside a fertile hollow – well, *I* thought of it as a valley, but the locals insisted - and there were only three points that would allow easy access to the town. There was nothing stopping someone walking through the fields, or slipping through at night, but I had other ways to deal with that. Most refugees would come up the road, the path of least resistance, and they would have to be stopped.

Ingalls might be able to survive if we guarded it properly, but if we took in all of the refugees, they'd eat us out of house and home.

"I'm giving Mac overall command of those sections," I added. I expected dissent – Mac wasn't a Deputy, after all, even though I had tried to talk him into it – but there was none. "Your task is to set up blockades to prevent access to the town and then guard the blockades." That, at least, was basic military common sense. A defence that wasn't covered by heavily armed guards was little more than an irritant. "Mac will know what to do, but don't be afraid to use deadly force to stop anyone from entering the town."

I paused. "You will prevent anyone from entering who isn't one of the townspeople, or doesn't have a useful skill," I continued. This was going to shock some of them, although both Jackson and Deborah were nodding in understanding. "Mac will determine what counts as a useful skill; anyone useful can enter, along with their families. Anyone else, keep them out and use as much firepower as you have to use to enforce it. Do you understand me?"

"Yes, sir," they said. They were all good kids.

"Rose, Deborah, you're going to be guarding the food stores," I said. Ingalls hadn't seen much in the way of panic buying, not yet, but tomorrow there would be riots in the streets. If they happened, we were fucked. "Get the store owners involved and get them to defend their properties as well. I'll assign anyone else I can spare to help you, but like the others, don't be afraid to use deadly force. We're going to need those stores."

There was another reason why I was keeping Rose, at least, back from where I was very certain was about to become the front line. Rose was a black belt in several martial arts, but she didn't look that dangerous. She was short and slim, attractive in a way that would have had me lusting after her if I were younger, and I knew what might happen if society started to break down. I'd seen it in Iraq and the inner cities; places where strength was respected above all else. Jackson and Jason looked intimidating. Rose couldn't scare a mouse unless it had heard of her reputation.

Mac stuck his head through the door. "Ed, I got the Posse and a couple of hundred others," he said, dryly. "You'd better get on with swearing them in."

I rolled my eyes. If I knew Mac, he'd probably started by getting the Posse, and then asking them to round up several dozen others who were known to be veterans, or excellent shots. The 'request' would become an order very quickly. Mac's family were important enough that almost no one would disobey. I was relieved to see, scanning the crowd of mostly middle-aged men, that he'd left some of the most important people out. I didn't need to have to send the storekeepers back to their stores.

"All right," I said, quickly. "Here is what we're going to do..."

The Jail Posse is one of those 'random voluntary associations' that you hear so much about on the news, mostly with a subtext of 'right-wing nuts with a gun fetish' following, something that always struck me as amusing. The original posse had one hundred members, who included forty Republicans, nineteen Democrats, seventeen people who swore never to vote on the theory that it only encouraged them, four homosexuals, one lesbian, two eco-freaks and a Chess Grandmaster. No, I don't know what he was doing there either. It was a

fairly even cross-section of Ingalls and was completely voluntary. Most of them were veterans. Mac, who'd effectively taken command, insisted on regular shooting practice and was ruthless at kicking out anyone who didn't come up to scratch. By the time of the Final War, there were two hundred effective members, allowing for some rotation of duty. My best estimate was that if the Posse was actually needed, we were going to have one hundred and fifty effectives at best. Mac had managed to surprise me. The only missing members were ones I knew to be out of town.

There was surprisingly little dispute or debate. The idea of guarding the town, in effect turning Ingalls into an armed fortress, wasn't what they'd signed up to do, but they'd seen the flashes in the distance and understood the problem. It was the newcomers who were the main problem – they hadn't actually drilled with the others, although most of them knew one end of a weapon from the other – but I was sure that Mac and a handful of ex-Sergeants could ride herd on them. Besides, it was Mac's baby. I wasn't going to get in his way.

"Section D will remain with me," I finished. That was thirty armed men, all veterans. I hadn't chosen them completely at random, but I wasn't keen on discussing *why* I had chosen them, not yet. I had already realised what I was going to have to do and...well, call me sentimental if you like, but I didn't want to involve Mac or the others. "Any questions?"

There was a brief buzz of conversation. "What about our children? What about fallout? What about school tomorrow? What about food? What about..."

I tackled some of the questions as quickly and brutally as I could. The National Guardsmen would have to keep watching for fallout, but for the moment, we were clear. Fallout, believe it or not, is actually quite overrated, but it wasn't a joke. If we had been closer to a city, I'd have been seriously considering an organised evacuation.

"Keep everyone who doesn't have urgent business outside inside," I ordered, finally. Rose and Deborah would see to that, in-between watching the food stores. Even a small amount of protection can keep you safe from radiation, provided that you don't abuse it. "Deborah, once the stores are being protected, can you get back here and organise food for the guards? Use the stuff that will rot faster. I don't know how long the power will hold out."

That was another concern, I realised. Power. Ingalls had a coal-fired power plant, but when we ran out of coal, we were going to have to start digging up more. Virginia was lousy with coal, but it was going to be a drain on our manpower. And we were going to be fucked if – no, *when* – we ran out of a lot of things. There was a nuclear plant only a couple of dozen miles away, but what had happened to it? Was it even still useable, or had the Russians or the Chinese or whoever blasted it?

I watched the posse depart on their mission and sighed. I'd bent all kinds of laws already and, God knew, I was going to break some outright in the next few hours. I knew, however, that there would be no help from the government. A single crisis would be quite bad enough...and, as far as I knew, at least forty nukes had detonated on American soil. I didn't know it at the time, but that estimate was out by at least an order of magnitude.

"Time to move," I said, and led the way to the remaining jeeps. "We have a jail to visit."

Well, Uncle Billy had always said I'd go to jail, hadn't he?

I guess he'd been right all along.

Chapter Four

*Oh, where are you coming from, soldier, gaunt soldier,
With weapons beyond any reach of my mind,
With weapons so deadly the world must grow older,
And die in its tracks, if it does not turn kind?*

-Stephen Vincent Benét

And *lo*, the bombs did fall!

Even as I was realising that Ingalls, to all intents and purposes, was on its own against a suddenly-hostile universe, the bombs were falling all over America. The Russians had launched hundreds of missiles and sent dozens of bombers towards America, an exchange that lasted nearly a week. No one could stop after the first missile flew, just as we had predicted long ago, and the devastation mounted rapidly. The country itself shuddered in pain.

But it wasn't fatal. More nonsense has been written on the subject of nuclear war than almost anything else, with the possible exception of sex and religion. People were told, right from the start, that nuclear war would be so bad that no one and nothing would survive, and that the entire world would plunge into nuclear winter, but few knew anything about the true facts of the matter. The issue wasn't helped by various governments that generally covered up the question, rather than allowing public debate, but they merely left the ground open for their enemies. Let me try, then, to explain what actually did happen to America during the Final War.

The first thing to understand is that a nuclear weapon is, in some ways, just like any other weapon. (I'll pause here to allow the lynch mob to break up. Back when we were working on war plans, we were surprised to discover that that was true, although we should have known from some of the operating assumptions of NBC training.) It is not all-powerful, or all-destructive. Under the right circumstances, a nuclear weapon's impact can be almost-completely neglected. The defence programs that various countries, including the United States, launched were intended to limit the effects of nuclear war on their military machines. The population was very much a secondary concern.

But the basic facts are clear enough. Take...say, a USAF airfield, flying fast-jets. They're damned big places, just to allow them to soak up hits from conventional weapons and keep operating. The runways are also hard and a nuclear airburst, high over the base, won't inflict *that* much damage, at least in theory. In practice, the nukes did cause considerable devastation, but the runways were still useable with a little work. A mountain fortress, like the famed NORAD in Colorado Springs, has a great deal of natural protection that the Army Corps of Engineers improved upon in all kinds of interesting ways. The Russians hit it anyway – and no, I don't know why, seeing it was shut down years ago – and it took them several nukes to inflict serious damage. A nuke might produce a big bang, but it is not an Invincible Weapon of DOOM!

A nuclear blast has five distinctive components; light, heat, blast, radiation and EMP. There are reasons for this involving a lot of complicated physics that I won't bother to go into. If you want more information, you can find most of it in a good textbook; hell, college kids have built nuclear bombs, although without the nuclear material to set one off. I'm not

entirely sure if I approve of this kind of information being freely available, but no one bothered to ask my opinion. Luckily, actually manufacturing the nuclear material to make the bomb go BOOM is quite a bit harder than it sounds.

Anyway...

Let's get one thing out of the way first. The Russians did not target the civilian population of the United States. (Ok, I see another lynch mob coming...) They targeted vital facilities that happened to be surrounded by civilian populations. This actually explains some of the odder population densities following the Final War; there were entire clumps of Americans that the Russians decided weren't worth the effort to blast, simply because that would cost them a warhead without any reasonable gain. They went after political targets, like the White House, military targets, like Camp Pendleton, and economic targets, such as PANTEX and various oil facilities, factories and suchlike. They had a worse problem than we had. Their weapons weren't always reliable. They actually fired several warheads at critical targets just to make damn sure that at least one of them exploded. This actually caused other problems, mainly nuclear fratricide, but they didn't care. They just wanted to ensure that one of the bombs would detonate.

So the Russians decide that one of the facilities in New York deserves the attention of at least one warhead. Most people don't bother to think about this – or didn't, before the Final War – but there are more reasonable targets in any given area than they appreciate. New York is – was – a financial centre for the entire world. Taking it out would cripple whatever remained of our economy and torpedo other nations all around the world. This would be pretty bad for Russia as well, but at that point they were probably past caring. Like I said, the final hours were hellish, with all sides just using nukes like firecrackers. The world had gone insane.

The bomb detonates. The first effect is light, which moves – as you might expect – at the speed of light. On an earthly scale, this is effectively instant. Anyone too close to ground zero and looking in the wrong direction is almost certainly blinded. Anyone further away will see the flash first and, as we were taught in NBC survival courses, have a chance to take cover. We thought, for terrifying hours during the Iraq War, that Saddam actually *had* popped a nuke during a particularly nasty sandstorm, but I don't recall anyone actually panicking. Anyone a few miles away might just have a chance to survive...

And then comes the heat. Anything flammable is set on fire, almost instantly, for quite some distance. That's quite a bit. Take a look around and see how much in your room can burn. Wood, clothes, floors and carpets, books...and, worst of all, cars. A car with a full tank will go up like a bomb. Anyone caught inside their car when the bomb detonates, as we believe that far too many people were, is dead. They won't stand a chance of escaping before the heat turns their car into a death-trap. Oh, and people can burn too...

And then comes the blast. Unlike the heat or light, the blast can be channelled by buildings, or terrain, or whatever else it encounters, causing all kinds of weird effects. Blast doesn't move at anything like the speed of light, so someone who had been warned by the flash to take cover has an excellent chance of survival. On the other hand, anyone who was near ground zero has been blinded, incinerated, and now scattered across miles. Some buildings will be strong enough to stand up to the blast, others, particularly newer and cheaper buildings, will be knocked down like the houses of the Three Little Pigs. It's blast that

actually causes the *real* damage, although our hypothetical civilian might disagree. The concentrated force of a nuke is nothing to laugh at.

Ironically, radiation is actually less of a danger than popular fiction would have it, depending on the exact attack profile. Most of the radiation produced by the blast will be gone within hours, while most attack patterns rely on using airbursts, which do not suck up so much dust from the ground and throw it into the air, producing fallout. The idea of fallout as a deadly invisible plague, moving randomly across the landscape, is nonsense. Fallout is, basically, radioactive dust floating through the air, carried by wind and rain. It is something that can be handled with a little preparation.

And, finally, EMP, the joker in the deck. EMP – Electromagnetic Pulse – is extremely bad news for anything electronic, particularly more modern electronics. Anything exposed to the EMP, or connected to something exposed to the EMP, will be damaged, perhaps destroyed, by the pulse. The entire United States was held together by its formidable electronic infrastructure. The Russians targeted the EMP specifically on our infrastructure and fucked it up completely. Oh, there were entire sections that had been protected and survived, but the network had been thoroughly trashed. Like I said before, they left out the emergency when they ran the drills...

The irony is that all the ‘duck and cover’ films weren't *that* stupid. If you weren't at ground zero, you had an excellent chance of survival. I reviewed pretty much all of them while I was working for the analysts and most of them had a hard core of common sense that was generally ignored. Not all of them, however; the British came up with some piece of crap entitled *Protect and Survive* that should really have been called *How to Delude Yourself About the Bomb*. They were really cheated by their government. *Protect and Survive* wasn't even good enough for wiping your ass after going to the toilet.

But I digress. Sorry.

If you've read this far, without deciding to join the lynch mob, you're probably wondering if I've lost my mind. Hell, this sounds almost rosy, compared to what happened, right? Well, no...

Let's look at New York as a case study. New York was targeted by, as far as we can determine, seven warheads, of which five detonated. We won't know for sure unless we locate an intact copy of the Russian records and, so far, we haven't recovered anything of the sort. One of the nukes went off over Manhattan Island in an airburst, while the others came down on the outskirts of the city. God knows what happened to the two that didn't detonate, but my guess is that they were caught in the first blasts and were destroyed. Nukes, unlike dynamite, can't be triggered by another nuke detonating in close proximity. Thank Heaven for small mercies.

So New York gets hit, badly. Let us assume, for the sake of argument, that roughly thirty percent of the population was composed of medical staff, policemen, the city's government and the remainder of the people who keep a city running. This is probably ludicrously optimistic, but bear with me a moment. The nukes detonate and the city's emergency plans swing smoothly into gear, right?

Wrong.

The city has just been trashed. Even under the best-case scenario, pretty much the entire civilian government has been totalled. The hospitals and medical centres have been trashed. Law and order on the streets is nothing more than a memory. The doctors, nurses, medical corpsmen, first aid trained people and so on have just been decimated. They don't have a single fire; they have fires pretty much everywhere. The streets have been thoroughly blocked by the wreckage of everything between fallen skyscrapers to incinerated cars. The firemen have probably lost their fire engines to the heat. Even if they were protected – and some fire stations are designed to survive such heat – where do they start? The entire fucking city might as well be on fire!

Back when Mac and I were looking at the emergency plans, we were struck by how much they relied on the Feds, mainly FEMA. I said at the time that that wouldn't work out very well in practice and I was right. You see, a government is *always* a massive bureaucratic entity. This was true enough of the American Government and goes double for the European Union and tenfold for a communist state. The more you want from your government, the more power you have to give it, and the more people it has to employ to try to give you what you want. In this case, New York needs help, but New York is one of many places that need help desperately. The sheer scale of the disaster would be disastrous – hah – even if the federal government has been intact and New York had been the only place hit. The Final War saw plenty of cities hit, along with military bases and industrial plants. There would be no help for New York. The Federal Government, to all intents and purposes, no longer existed.

The President was dead. The Vice President was dead. The Speaker of the House was dead. Congress was pretty much dead...although the Russians probably did us a favour there. The military had been decimated. Most of the best units had been in Europe and had been hammered during the early stages of the exchange. The contingency plans should have been implemented at once, but the people who were supposed to be implementing them were dead, or disabled, or out of contact. The cities and their thousands of suffering inhabitants were on their own.

And believe me, they were really in trouble. The population could be divided into four categories; dead, seriously injured, slightly injured and unharmed. The dead should have been buried at once, but there was hardly any time to do that, even if the resources and personnel had existed. Their bodies started to decompose and spread diseases. The seriously injured weren't much better off. They couldn't move, couldn't help themselves and couldn't help others. They pretty much died off within the next few days. The lightly injured counted themselves lucky, at first, but the truth was that they were in serious danger themselves. Without proper medical care, wounds became infected and grew life threatening. Broken bones that would have meant a day or two in hospital and a few months in casts suddenly became crippling. The uninjured did what they could, at first, but they were overwhelmed by the sheer scale of the disaster. It was beyond any comprehension.

And society was beginning to break down. Society works the way it does because it is bound together by a common agreement on the rules. That's pretty much why social trust is lower when there are large unassimilated masses of immigrants; the immigrants didn't share the same rules. The shock of the nuclear attack broke down entire sections of American society, knocking us down to bedrock. Me and mine first became the rallying call for thousands of survivors, forgetting anything as simple as common decency in their desperate struggle for

survival. Old conventions were breaking everywhere. Ordinary law-abiding citizens scavenged for what they needed to survive, while defending their own families with deadly force, keeping out anyone who wasn't *them*. Street gangs indulged in orgies of looting, searching for their own supplies, while thousands died in the streets and the city burned down around them. It was hell on Earth.

They ask me, now, why the Army didn't put a stop to it. The theory is simple enough; shoot a few dozen looters and the rest will get the idea. The truth was that the Army was scattered and broken, smashed down to individual units, while the Police were largely killed by the bombs, or facing their own private hells. What's the difference between an army and an armed mob? Answer; the army is disciplined, but the armed mob is not. They just didn't have the active manpower to stop the chaos in anywhere, but a handful of places. The remainder were allowed to slip into hell. They had no choice. What else could they have done? There was no longer anyone governing the entire country.

Not everywhere fell into hell. Texas got lucky; they had a capable and intelligent Governor who managed to preserve enough of the National Guard to maintain some semblance of order in Austin. San Francisco went the other way. Their Mayor was a Badger – a term I'll introduce to you later – who was lynched. I guess he didn't realise that the laws of the land had been replaced with the law of the jungle. Canada lost a pair of cities, but the vast majority of the land was untouched by the nukes, while Portland had a former history professor who somehow – don't ask me how – managed to hold part of society together. It probably helped that Portland wasn't targeted specifically by the Russians and suffered barely any damage at all, in the short term. There are all kinds of strange stories about the exchange and its aftermath, including some that are flat-out unbelievable...

But that's not important at the moment. The modern city holds far – far – more people than it can hope to feed. Even with a good half of the population dead, the cities still needed food brought in from outside...and it wasn't coming. The road, rail and air links had been destroyed. There was very little left in the cities after the bombs, fires and looting, although some people managed to survive for quite some time on stored food, even including pet food. I know it sounds disgusting – hell, it *is* disgusting – but it was a choice between that or starving. Some people managed to locate stores of food for supermarkets that had survived while waiting to go on the shelves and ended up lords of the ruined cities. We encountered several of those gangs later. They were nasty bastards. Most people shouldn't have power for their own good. The experience destroyed them.

And yes, some people resorted to cannibalism. We prefer to forget that detail.

And, sooner or later, people realised that the only place to find food lay outside the cities, which were rapidly becoming death zones. (More on them later.) People had been trying to leave the city since the first alerts were sounded – we ended up, later, calling some of the interstates Highways of Death, because of all the burned cars – but now it was almost all of the survivors. The thousands who could still walk, or had a car that had somehow survived the blasts and the resulting chaos, leaving the cities that had housed them for their entire lives. They started to swarm out like locusts, towards the countryside towns and farms...

Towards Ingalls, towards us...

Oh, shit.

Chapter Five

I personally have always voted for the death penalty because I believe that people who go out prepared to take the lives of other people forfeit their own right to live. I believe that that death penalty should be used only very rarely, but I believe that no-one should go out certain that no matter how cruel, how vicious, how hideous their murder, they themselves will not suffer the death penalty.

-Margaret Thatcher

I spent the drive up towards the prison thinking hard, relying on my escorts to watch out for trouble. I wasn't expecting it, yet, but it wouldn't be long before the areas between towns and cities became as dangerous as the Iraqi supply lines had become in the first years of the occupation. This is America. Hundreds of thousands of people had guns and they would be becoming desperate. We were desperate and we were inside a town, with a large proportion of military veterans...and others wouldn't have that consolation. They might come to us for help, or they might devolve into bandits.

It sounds pessimistic, I know, but people can change terrifyingly quickly when under any kind of pressure. I'd seen some of the more classified projections and I'd seen it in action in Iraq. Society would fall apart remarkably quickly as 'me and mine first' became the dominant rule, as if it had never always been the dominant rule. Americans, particularly city-dwellers, had been insulated from that particularly truth of the universe, but they'd learn it again in a hurry.

You see, society works by mutual agreement on the rules. You grow up under your parents' care, go to school and get educated, graduate and get a job, which pays you money that you can use to feed yourself. The value of money was soon going to go down sharply; money is only useful as long as people accept it. There's a great deal of theory behind it that I won't bore you with, but suffice it to say that people would prefer food to money. You can't eat money. Your weight in gold, which really isn't that much, would be worth less than your weight in canned goods. The invisible glue that binds society together would have been melted by the nukes. The result would be complete chaos.

I tensed slightly as the SUV turned off the road and started to head up towards the prison, my escorts clutching their weapons as if they expected to be ambushed at any moment. This was the scenario we'd practiced back when the Jail Posse was first set up, back when the prison had been built, and they were taken refuge in what they knew. I couldn't blame them for that, even though I hoped that we wouldn't have to shoot our way into the jail. If we needed to fight, I didn't have enough men with me.

The Stonewall West Virginia Maximum Security Prison had been a political hot potato ever since some bright spark in the government decided it had to be built. There were too many prisoners that it would be political suicide to release, or to inject with something nicely lethal, and the jails we had were overcrowded. They decided that a new prison was required and, after a political dogfight, settled on a place near Ingalls. We – the locals – didn't like the idea. We didn't want to be so close to known murderers, child molesters, rapists and other scum of the Earth, even though the jail was supposed to be secure. I knew from my experience, as did the other vets, that there was no such thing. Any jail can suffer an escape if the guards make a single mistake.

And so we'd formed the Jail Posse. If there were an escape, the Posse would guard Ingalls and hunt down the escaped prisoners as soon as possible. It was something I'd been dreading, even though I knew that it was going to be necessary; if the Posse accidentally killed one of the escaped prisoners, there was going to be an almighty row over it. It would be made out like an attack from Judge Lynch, not self-defence or even a legitimate shooting, and Ingalls would suffer. It hadn't kept others awake at night. They would sooner shoot a known child molester than risk letting the bastard at one of their kids. At bottom, so would I.

"It looks intact, Sheriff," Brent Roeder said, as we drove up towards the walls. The watchtowers surrounding the prison were definitely manned, much to my relief, while the walls remained intact. I'd been fearing that somehow they would have been breached. The last thing we needed was a mass jailbreak. "Where do you want us to park?"

I had to laugh. Brent was one of the toughest sons of bitches I'd met. He was built like a lineman, with a brown buzz cut, and looked rather more fearsome than I did, even with the uniform. He'd been a soldier before he'd quit the Army – and no, I didn't know why at the time – and was one of the foremost shots in the country. As you can imagine, he was up against some pretty stiff competition.

"You and I will go into the gates," I said, calmly. It was still possible that the prisoners had taken over the jail, but it was looking less and less likely by the minute. "The remainder of the Posse will wait here."

The gates of the prison had been designed to look intimidating as hell, although I'd seen more intimidating sights while on deployment. There was only one guard at the gate, a serious breach of security, but he called the Guard Captain and waved us through into the forecourt. I was already regretting leaving the Posse outside. Something was clearly very wrong here. I might even have miscalculated...

"Sheriff," a relieved voice said. I turned to see Captain Richard Hartman as he popped out of the main prison block and waved to me. "God, am I glad to see you."

"I'm glad to see you too," I said, neutrally. Don't get me wrong; Richard was a good man, but there had been a great deal of friction between us. I had focused on the possibilities of a prisoner escape, as was my duty, and he had regarded that as a vote of no confidence. I couldn't blame him for that, but I didn't have the time or the patience to deal with injured egos. "What's going on here?"

He led us into his office, a bare cubicle illuminated by a flickering light – the prison had its own generator, something else that might come in handy in the very near future – and poured himself a large scotch. I declined it when he offered me the bottle and I was relieved to see that Brent made the same decision. I didn't know what was going on, but getting drunk wouldn't help anything, not now. I needed all my wits about me.

"We're overcrowded, understaffed, and we can't reach anyone," Richard said, when he'd finished his glass. I picked up the bottle and put it out of reach. "I was starting to worry that we were all alone in the world when you arrived."

I shuddered. The layman – and yes, I included Richard in that statement – has a hugely exaggerated view of nuclear war. It would be quite possible for someone to convince

themselves that the country no longer existed and that they were the last man alive, or the last town alive, or a military unit without a country. Why not? They had all been the subject of hundreds of post-nuclear war films and novels.

But Richard had bought up something I *had* forgotten. The Stonewall wasn't just for the real scrum of the Earth any longer, but for other prisoners as well. It had been intended to hold a thousand prisoners at most – and that requires a massive building – but local courts had been sending them even more offenders, most of whom didn't deserve to share quarters with murderers and rapists. There were boys who were blamed for petty theft, white collar criminals who'd stolen from their companies, even innocent kids who'd been framed by local police departments...and, through political pressure, had been given the hammer. No politician likes to be thought of as soft on crime and...well, the Stonewall has a terrifying reputation. I had known about it, vaguely, before the war, but now...

Now Richard and his staff were sitting on a volcano. A prison is a pent-up hive of fury, hatred and worse, with prisoners who were beyond any reason. They had already been jailed for the rest of their lives, or sentenced to death when the endless process was finally concluded, and had little to lose. Passions rocketed through the prison, with groups of prisoners turning on each other in racial or religious fury, and the wardens were caught in the middle. They were called Correctional Officers, these days, but I always thought of them as guards. I'd been a Marine, and that had sent me into some of the most hellish places on Earth, but a prison could be worse. The prisoners had nothing to lose.

"I see," I said, finally. The conclusion I'd come to earlier was bubbling up in my head. "How many people do you have here?"

"Seventy guards, five nurses and ten other staff," Richard said. I bit down a curse. They were undermanned, all right. The State preferred to pay overtime than hire more guards, with the net result that most of the guards were badly overworked and worn out. It was worse for the nurses. They often quit after a year or two and went into the private sector, where money was better and they didn't have to worry about being knifed or raped by one of their patients. "Two of the guards took a jeep and drove off to find their families. I couldn't stop them, but..."

I nodded in understanding. Society was breaking down, remember?

He looked up at me. "Sheriff, Ed, what are we going to do?"

Now, I have a habit of solving problems if they are put in front of me, even if the solutions are not to everyone's taste. I learned that in Boot Camp and then had it hammered into me during deployment. In the civilian sector, you can afford to wait until you get it perfect, but in the military you often have to do the best you can and hope it's good enough. Indeed, perfect is always the enemy of good enough. I had a solution to the problem – and to my problem – if I dared to use it. The decision was easier than I had expected. It helped that there was little choice. The last thing we needed, as I had said, was a prison break.

I ran my hand through my hair and looked up at the chart on Richard's wall. It showed, in precise pencilled-detail, just how the prison was organised. It took me a moment to sort out the colour coding, but once I understood I saw how it all fitted together. Some of the very worst – the paedophiles and a handful of terrorists – had been segregated for their own

protection. Prisoners like to think that they still have rank and status...and traitors, child molesters and terrorists were right at the bottom. They tended not to survive being in the general population...well, not for very long.

“All right,” I said, finally. “Listen carefully.”

I explained, briefly, what I knew about the war. “It seems likely,” I concluded, “that the federal and state governments no longer exist in any form we would care to recognise. We cannot depend on the police or the army or even parts of the National Guard any longer. I know they’ll do what they can, but they’re going to be completely overwhelmed. We’re on our own.”

I watched his face slump. Most of the guards were young unmarried men...and the handful who were married had homes near the prison. A pair of them, I remembered now, had had family in Ingalls. I’d have to chew them both out for leaving their posts, but after that I would have to forgive them, probably. It didn’t look as if it had been disastrous. Richard, however, no longer had a place to call home. Norfolk had definitely been hit. If he hadn’t been devoured from his wife...

“Now, we’re going to have to take action fast,” I continued. Time wasn’t entirely on our side. “What have you done with the prisoners?”

“They’re in lockdown,” Richard said. He looked more composed now that I’d presented him with a problem he could solve. “They’re meant to be exercising at this time, but I daren’t take more than a handful out of the cells without more guards. The ones on meds are going to be needing them soon, Sheriff, and we’re going to run out pretty quickly.”

I scowled. Some of the prisoners would be on meds, of course. I had forgotten. Most of them would have AIDS, or something else equally nasty, while others would have all kinds of drugs intended to keep them calm and tranquil. I had never liked the concept of medicating a young boy who had been diagnosed with ADD, but it did seem to help some of the prisoners. Deprived of their medications, they would rapidly swing back towards their more normal behaviour, losing what little control they had. We could keep medicating them for a few weeks, depending on how many drugs there were stored in the prison – something else I’d have to check – but sooner or later we would run out...and then it would be Katy bar the door. There was nothing we could do for them.

“Brent, go back outside and bring in the Posse,” I ordered, finally. “I want them to become familiar with the prison. Get a pair of the guards to give them a tour of everywhere, but listen to them and don’t let the prisoners get to you. Richard, I want you to give me a private tour, just now.”

Brent didn’t question me. In hindsight, that was a little odd. “Of course,” Richard said. “What should I tell the guards?”

“They know about the war,” I said, grimly. It hadn’t been high on my list of concerns, but it should have been. I hadn’t delegated this task to anyone, even to Mac. I didn’t want to take the coward’s way out. “Tell them that we will be happy to accept any of them in Ingalls if they want to stay.”

Richard gave me a brief tour of the prison. I'd toured it before, back when I'd become Sheriff, but it hadn't been so overcrowded then. The prison cells looked strong enough to hold lions, but some of the prisoners looked stronger, almost as if they were monstrous caricatures of human beings. It was always a surprise to know just how strong prisoners could become, trapped in a world where strength was everything, although I wasn't particularly scared. I had done very well in unarmed combat, under a Drill Sergeant who had been a fearsome bastard, three times as intimidating as the worst of the prisoners.

Others looked more fearful. They did their best to hide it, but they were terrified of the other prisoners, or even of the guards. I didn't blame them. Some of them looked young enough to be my sons, while others looked surprisingly innocent, almost baby-faced. I distrusted those prisoners on sight. They were too good to be true. Richard escorted me around, keeping me well away from the bars, pointing out some of the worst offenders.

"That's Lono," he said, pointing to a man who looked large enough to pick up and carry an entire Abrams tank. "He got into a bar fight and killed pretty much everyone else in the bar and they had to taser him to stop him. Drugged up, of course. He's been sentenced to life here."

His finger met a meek-looking man, almost a real-life Clark Kent. "David Apple," Richard identified him. "He found a small girl in his garden one day and had his way with her. It must have started something, because he kidnapped three other girls over the next few weeks and tortured them to death slowly and painfully. He's under sentence of death, but he's currently launching his third appeal. His first night here was almost his last. A pair of convicts got to him and started to rape him when we broke it up. They came damn close to killing him."

I didn't hear any regret in his voice. "And that's the type of people we have here," Richard concluded. "What are you going to do with them?"

"What I have to do," I said. My plans had congealed nicely into something workable. All I had to do was get started. "I assume that you have complete records here?"

"Of course," Richard said, confidently. "You do know that they're meant to be sealed..." He broke off at my snort. Prisoner records might have been meant to be confidential, but it hardly mattered any longer. There was no longer any Law and Order, but us. "What do you want to know about them?"

"I want to sort them out," I said, as Brent approached. "Any problems?"

"One of the prisoners tried to grab Stacy's ass," Brent said. I scowled. I shouldn't have allowed Stacy anywhere near the prison, but I wasn't in the mood for an argument over sexual equality. "She broke his arm with her rifle butt."

"Good for her," I said, relaxing slightly. The last time anyone had taken liberties with Stacy, during an unarmed combat competition, she'd thrown them clear across the mat. She really was as good as she claimed to be, which made a change from some of the other feminists I'd met in my career. "I have a job for you."

Chapter Six

I think we need to change that old saying, "I don't need a building to fall on me." Because two did and we still don't get it. I think we all stick our head in the sand as a deep human impulse.

-Bill Maher

My plan was straightforward, but ruthless.

"Richard," I said, "I want you to sort the prisoners out into three categories. The ones who need medications to survive, the ones who are truly nasty and beyond redemption and everyone else. I trust your judgement in sorting them out, but make sure that all the real fucks go into the second category."

Richard nodded and headed off to his office. He'd made a brief announcement to his staff, explaining that they were all part of Ingalls now, and few had dissented. The handful who had dissented turned out to have families in other towns and cities and wanted to go back there. I agreed at once when they demanded the right to return after we'd dealt with the prisoners.

I found myself studying the guards with interest. I had spent time guarding prisoners myself in Iraq and I had quickly learned to isolate the dangerous ones from the sheep who had been herded into battle at gunpoint. It wasn't that difficult. The sheep sat around, grateful beyond words that they hadn't been shot out of hand, while the dangerous ones sought to cause trouble. The new Iraqi Government had had a very simple way of dealing with such bastards. They took them to special camps outside the cities and shot them, burying them far from their homes and families. It was a lesson I had taken to heart.

And I was sure that I could trust the guards and their instincts more than I could trust what any bleeding heart social worker had written. The average prisoner is no master-brain, but many of them, including David Apple, are damn good at working the system. They seek to convince good-hearted people that they have reformed, that they're no longer a threat to society, that they have 'rights' that we should honour...and far too many of them fall for it. I understand the impulse to do good, or to believe the best of people, but sometimes they take it too far. Where does the blame lie, I ask you, if the convicted murderer is released to murder again?

And rights? A person is born with rights, but as far as I am concerned, they're rights that can be forfeited. Who says that the 'rights' of a murderer are more important than those of his victims? What 'right' does a rape victim have to be raped? She's the *victim*. Why should she be punished by watching her tormentor go free? It might be nice to see the world through rose-tinted lenses, but it was not a delusion that I was prepared to embrace. The vast majority of the prisoners deserved to spend the rest of their lives behind bars, if not a final appointment with the executioner.

The guards, I suspected, privately agreed. They saw the prisoners all the time, watching them carefully, always knowing that one misstep could prove fatal. Their testimony should have meant more than the psychologists hired by the defence lawyers who – of course – testified that the defendant was mentally unbalanced, as opposed to outright evil. The guards were mainly male, as I had expected, but a handful of them were female, one of which had a nasty

scar across her face. The turnover of female guards was high, or so I'd been told; they seemed to be challenged more than their male counterparts. The prison was not a place for the politically correct.

"All right," I said, as calmly as I could. "This is what we are going to do."

Richard's list was a little on the optimistic side, as far as I was concerned, but I trusted his judgement. The first list, the men who needed drugs to survive, was the longest. It actually included several names that should also have been on the second list. The second list was slightly shorter, but between them they included nearly two thirds of the prison's entire population. Desperate men, criminals all, who could *not* be released to add to the chaos. I didn't dare take that risk...

And so we poisoned them.

It was simple enough. The prisoners often had different diets – the influence of the do-gooders again – and it was easy enough to ensure that the worst of the prisoners received the poisoned food. There were a handful of complaints about the quality of the food, but they were ignored and pretty soon the convicts were dying. The prison had stored enough concentrated poison to exterminate a small town reasonably painlessly – or so they claimed, but I don't know for sure – and we watched them die. A handful of guards and a third of the Posse refused to watch, but the others, mainly veterans themselves, watched dispassionately. The remainder of the prisoners, the ones we had spared, stared in horror. They were used to being treated with kid gloves, by guards who feared being sued; they had never expected a massacre. The shock would do them good.

"I often dreamed about doing that," Richard said, softly. I nodded in agreement. If I'd been in his place, I would have had the same fantasy. "What are you going to do with the others?"

Did I do the right thing? The hell of the matter is that I don't know. Yes, I couldn't take the risk of allowing them to run rampant across the countryside, not on top of all the other chaos. Yes, they all deserved death and worse. Yes, we couldn't have kept them supplied with the medications after the supplies in the jail ran out. We couldn't have produced them, as far as I knew, for years. The ones who *needed* the drugs would have died when they ran out. The ones who didn't need the drugs would not have reformed. In a world where law and order was no longer a going concern, they would have become a nightmare...

And they would never hurt anyone else.

"Get the remainder of the prisoners into the auditorium," I said, finally. We'd given the ones we – I – had decided to spare a good meal, certainly better than soup that looked suspiciously like vomit, but most of them had been reluctant to eat. It had to be pointed out to most of them that killing them would be as simple as poking a gun through the bars and firing a single shot. I got the impression that most of the guards were privately amused. They had a chance to really scare most of the prisoners straight. "I have to talk to them."

The auditorium was just another lecture hall, where lucky prisoners would get a chance to listen to whatever band dared to perform in the jail (and most of whose members deserved to be *in* jail), although it was rather less comfortable than some I'd attended while in Iraq. The guards watched, wearing their body armour and carrying their weapons, as the prisoners were

escorted into the hall and secured to the benches. It was rather less civilised than a college lecture hall, but I had the feeling that it might actually be safer, maybe even less rowdy. Two veterans who'd carried machine guns in Iraq had set a pair up in position to spray the prisoners with bullets if they got out of hand, while other members of the Posse held their own weapons, ready to intervene if matters got out of hand. I didn't intend them to get out of hand, at all, but something might well go wrong...

I stood up on the dais and stared down at them. The prisoners stared back with a conflating mixture of emotions, ranging from cold hatred to respect and even joy. They had feared the worst of the prisoners as much as I had, perhaps more, and were glad to see them dead. They also feared me, which wasn't actually a bad thing. I wanted them to fear me. It would make them much more amiable to reason.

Yes, I'm a bastard sometimes. Bear in mind that most of them thoroughly deserved their prison sentences.

"Pay attention," I snapped, finally. My voice echoed through the room, loudly enough to be heard by all of the prisoners. "The country has been plunged into war."

On cue, the lights flickered slightly. If you're thinking that that is a remarkably suspicious coincidence, you're entirely correct; it was. I had given Richard instructions to flicker the lights from time to time, just to add to the atmosphere. I needed them malleable and scared. It would make this much easier.

I didn't hold anything back, either, apart from one detail. "We are under nuclear attack," I continued. "Hundreds of cities have been destroyed and millions of megatons have been detonated on our soil" – a *slight* exaggeration, but one I felt was justified under the circumstances – "and the country is in ruins. We no longer have the time or inclination to play nice with scrum like you...and we showed you just how we were prepared to treat even worse scrum than you."

"You can't do this," a voice shouted from the rear of the auditorium. It was one of the white collar criminals, a criminal lawyer – which was a perfectly accurate job description – who bilked his clients out of millions of dollars. "We have *rights*!"

"I knew someone would say something like that," I said, cheerfully. I nodded in the direction of Stacy, who was holding her prized sniper rifle. "These are the kind of rights you have."

The shot echoed out in the dead silence. It was a perfect shot. The lawyer fell back into the crowd, a small hole neatly drilled through his head. Stacy had done it so well that no one else was even remotely injured, thankfully. I didn't want to waste labour if it wasn't necessary.

"I trust that that makes my point?" I asked, calmly. There was a brittle silence in the room. "You have no rights any longer. The society that guaranteed you those rights is gone. It has been replaced by a desperate struggle for survival, one in which you will either play a role in helping us survive, or you will die."

I looked around the room, wondering who would choose to help...and who would try to break away as soon as possible. The real hard cases were dead and quite a few of the remainder were actually innocent, or punished well beyond what they deserved, or might

even have made something of their lives if they had been allowed a chance to grow up in a better society. For every kid who had a mother, a father and an Uncle Billy, there was probably five or ten who didn't have anything of the sort. Perhaps working in Ingalls for a few years would turn their lives around...or perhaps they would step out of line. They were, after all else, expendable.

"This is the deal," I said. "You will work for us for a period of five years, after which you will be free and independent citizens of the new America, whatever form it takes. You will be treated with a certain kind of respect and the more useful you make yourself, the more respect you will earn. You may even graduate to citizenship early..."

"Or you can die."

"I cannot allow you to run over the countryside, or try to return to your homes, such as they were," I continued. "If you refuse to work for us, I will have no choice, but to dispose of you. I am not going to run a chain gang" – and there I was lying, effectively speaking – "and I am not going to flog you in to work. If you refuse this offer, you will be given a final meal and then executed."

People, later, focused on that statement as a deadly mistake, as it ensured that almost all of the prisoners would join us, and some of them would plan to desert at the first available opportunity. I wasn't unaware of the possibility, but I didn't want to have to kill anyone else, not unless I had a good cause. You might laugh at that – after all, I had just ordered the poisoning of one thousand, seven hundred convicts – but they'd deserved it. The remainder didn't, at least in my view. And, I reasoned, if these losers and drug addicts had a taste of honest work, they might reform without any further pressure on my part. Hope springs eternal, right?

A man put his hand up, as if he were in school. "Sir...ah, what happens if we work for you for five years and then you refuse to give us...ah, citizenship?"

"Yeah," someone shouted, from the rear. "We're already citizens!"

"You were citizens of a state that no longer exists," I said, bluntly. It was true, in a sense, but I was determined that we would save as much as possible. I loved America, or at least the ideal of America, and it was *my* country. "If you work for us, we will accept you as citizens, with all the rights and duties that that implies. If you chose to leave us, at the end of that period, we will allow you to leave. If you refuse to work now...well, we can't feed you. Work, or starve."

We did a brief count after a handful of other questions. Some of the drug addicts were wondering if they could get drugs instead of any other reward, but I said no. There might be some highly illicit marijuana and opium being grown in a handful of places, but we were going to need it as a painkiller, not as a drug. There was plenty of tobacco around – Virginia grew plenty of that, despite the best efforts of the anti-smoking zealots – but I had a feeling that most of that was going to be replaced by food crops. If we could feed ourselves through the first two years, we should be fine, if only because of the coming die-off. I'd seen the projections and they were horrific.

And why, you might ask, did I want to save convicts? Why not just leave them all to die? I had a use in mind for them that I couldn't, or wouldn't, ask others to handle. I wasn't going to spend them lightly, but they could be used for things that others wouldn't touch, like recovering material from a Hot Zone. They were expendable...

Not entirely to my surprise, all of the convicts finally agreed to work for us. I ordered Richard to transfer copies of the files from the prisons computers to a USB drive, which I could use to study them later. If he had made a mistake, I wanted to know about it before it was too late to remove any potential troublemakers. Once we had most of the prisoners ready, we shackled them and led them outside for the first time in far too long, allowing them to see the skyline in the distance. We could still see the effects of the war. The entire skyline looked as if the land beyond the horizon was burning away into nothingness. The ground seemed to shiver and shake beneath us. I don't even want to hazard a guess as to what that was; more nukes, or something worse?

Great, I thought, with a flicker of self-mockery. We'll have zombies crawling out of the ground next.

"Start digging here," I ordered, once shovels and other tools had been distributed. There was little protest as the prisoners dug a massive pit, and another, and another, enough to bury all of the dead prisoners. I had seriously considered burning them, but we didn't have the time or fuel to waste. Leaving them above ground would have been a disastrous mistake. Dead bodies spread disease faster than a thousand unprotected whores. The cities were going to be charnel houses in a few days. The population that had survived being blinded, burned, scattered and irradiated would suffer the effects of thousands upon thousands of dead bodies. "The rest of you, follow me."

The poison we'd used had the effect of loosening the muscles, fortunately, but watching the prisoners carrying their former compatriots out was still an unpleasant sight. A handful of prisoners took the opportunity to kick their dead tormentors, which we ignored, but most of them couldn't bear to look at the dead. It wasn't going to be the last time when they would have to bury the dead. There was no chaplain on duty, so Richard said a few words over the bodies before we began to fill in the graves. It seemed to help, slightly.

Once I was sure that everything was proceeding as planned, I left Richard and Brent in charge and spent an hour going through the prison's supplies. I had known that they stockpiled quite a lot of supplies, but even I was astonished by the sheer level of paranoia that had gone into the planning. They had enough food to feed the prisoners for a few weeks, if they rationed it carefully, and enough weapons to hold off a small army or lynch mob. The prison wouldn't have been an easy target to take, even for my former Company, although if the prisoners had broken out and taken control, we would have had real problems. As it was, it was mine, all mine!

And I had plans for its future use.

"Brent, you're in charge here," I said, once we had the prison cleared of all of the dead bodies. "Richard, I'm going to send up an additional section of men from the Posse, so once they arrive, your guards can rotate off for a short period, before we start breaking up the population. Keep the prisoners in their cells, but use your own judgement otherwise."

“Yes, sir,” Brent said. “We’ll keep an eye on things here.”

I nodded. I hated to cut and run, but I was going to be needed back at Ingalls. By my most optimistic calculations it might be days before refugees arrived, but I doubted that it would be anything like as rosy. I had to know what Mac was doing...

As it happened, I wasn't even remotely prepared for what was to come.

Chapter Seven

...More and more people joined the painful exodus. Sad, weary women, their children stumbling and streaked with tears, their men bitter and angry, the rich rubbing shoulders with beggars and outcasts. Dogs snarled and whined, the horses' bits were covered with foam... and here and there were wounded soldiers, as helpless as the rest.

-Jeff Wayne's The War of the Worlds

"You should have taken me with you," Mac said, when I reached the first blockade and filled him in on what had happened at the prison. "You shouldn't have had to take that on your own shoulders."

I shrugged, not quite trusting myself to speak. I'd wondered, even though I had known that it was unlikely, if enough of the government had survived to rebuild society quickly. If that had been the case, and alas it wasn't, the people who massacred the prisoners would have been charged with mass murder, regardless of how justified their actions had been at the time. Where there is a shadow of doubt, there's a lawyer struggling to turn it into a weapon against the defendant...and I didn't want to put Mac through that, or anyone else. I had seen it happen before in Iraq. The people on the ground were endlessly second-guessed by politicians, the media, and retired military officers. It drove some of them to distraction.

If there was to be blame for the entire prison episode, I had decided, let it rest entirely on me.

Later, people would wonder if I had set the lawyer up to be shot, when he made his futile and silly protest. I hadn't, or at least I hadn't planned it to the point of having a specific victim in mind. There are people like Grand Admiral Thrawn who can predict events to that degree of precision, but they're fictional. No one in their right mind would depend on a plan that had so many different factors involved leading away from the desired outcome. I had known that there would be a victim – prisoners were told endlessly about their rights and rarely about their obligations – but I hadn't known whom. It was hard to muster any sympathy for the lawyer, however. I dislike and distrust lawyers.

"I needed you here," I said, finally. I wasn't going to cry on Mac's shoulder now, was I? He understood anyway through the shared understanding of men who'd been in battle, if not together. Civilians got to enjoy their delusions about reality, but a military officer who allowed himself to see what he wanted to see would be dead soon enough. General Percival had taught a lot of lessons to the world. It was a shame that most of them weren't heeded. "How's it going?"

Mac waved a hand down towards the road. His share of the Posse had been at work for hours and they'd constructed a fairly impressive-looking barrier, composed of everything from standard police roadblocks to cars and even dirt-packed boxes. It would have been more impressive if we'd had a few weeks and the right equipment, but he had already brought up a pair of bulldozers to strengthen the blockade. A pair of signs had been positioned further down the road, warning anyone who came up the road to stop, turn off their car engine, and walk towards the barrier with their hands in the air. Anyone coming closer without following those rules, the second sign warned, would be shot without further warning. Mac had carefully deployed four sharpshooters around the area, with the remainder of the Posse held behind for backup. Snipers are fearsome threats on a battlefield, but they do have limits on

how much lead they could pump out. If a mob of desperate citizens raged towards the blockade, the machine guns would have to deal with them.

I smiled. There are basically two ways to run an army. The first way is for the General – yes, I *know* there are plenty of intermediate ranks, but we’ll keep it simple – to tell a Captain in command of a Company what he wants done. The Captain looks at the target and either demands more troops or gets on with it. The General doesn’t interfere, trusting his subordinate to know what he’s doing, and when the Captain takes the target – or whatever – showers him with praise, reward, and another harder mission. (No successful operation ever goes unpunished.) The second way is for the General to insist on overseeing everything personally, right down to issuing specific orders for each individual PFC, and generally – hah – being a pain in the ass. Every person in high rank, or political office, will insist on having a say. An operation that could have been handled quickly and efficiently by a single Captain, the man on the spot, will rapidly loom larger than Operation Iraqi Freedom.

Now, guess which way is used by the American Government?

That’s right, the *second* way. There is nothing more dangerous than a senior office meddling in matters he doesn’t understand. The guy on the spot knows what he’s doing, the capabilities of the units under his command, and the limitations inherent in their position. The guy in an air-conditioned office in Washington only knows what he’s seeing on a map, which often misses out little details like minefields, or enemy snipers, or impassable blockades, or human shields...and yet he insists on a say. You don’t believe me?

Right back during the start of the war in Afghanistan, we had a dead bead on the leader of the Taliban, the worst group of scrum bags ever to walk the Earth. We could have killed him with ease. Why didn’t we? Because the question was relayed upwards and upwards through Washington, right through the Generals, the legal departments and everyone who couldn’t make a decision. Killing the enemy leader would be assassination...and we’re not allowed to assassinate people, are we? I have never understood the point of that – if some kindly soul had assassinated Saddam back in 1991, we wouldn’t have had to go to war in Iraq – but Congress and the rest of the Government gets to live in their own world. By the time it was finally decided that we could strike at the bastard, he’d left. A decision that should have taken minutes to make had taken hours...and left the military holding the bag.

I had already decided that I wasn’t going to do anything of the sort. I trusted Mac to get on with it without me looking over his shoulder the entire time. I might have had more doubts about leaving a REMF to handle affairs, but I wouldn’t have given such a vital task to a REMF in the first place. If he said it was done, it was done.

“Well done,” I said, finally. Mac grinned openly. Perhaps he’d known what I was thinking. “Have you seen any trouble yet?”

“A pair of people from Ingalls returned a couple of hours ago and we allowed them to enter the town after checking them for contamination,” Mac said. I nodded once. There’s an old military maxim about never giving an order you know won’t be obeyed and I knew that telling the Posse to keep out their own fellow townspeople would be disobeyed. It’s a *lot* harder to shoot someone you know and like. If I had tried to keep them out it would have torn apart the entire town. “A couple of other cars came up to the barrier and we inspected them, but neither of them had anyone useful in them...”

I should inject a comment here. The definition of ‘useful’ requires some elaboration. There are times – and I didn’t say this – when a lawyer comes in handy and is a desperately required skill. The same could be said for quite a few other occupations. If there hadn’t been a war or a prospect of a war, society might have decided that it didn’t actually *need* thousands of rough men standing guard to prevent their fellows from being disturbed in their beds. Occupations can be divided into three categories; material production – mining, for example – industry – turning the raw materials into products – and service, which is basically anything else. A lawyer is a service, so is a prostitute, a pizza delivery guy and a reporter. They weren’t *vital* to keeping society functioning, even though rumour has it that some of the stupidest decisions at the Pentagon had come out of nights when they ran out of Coffee.

Take a Political Scientist as an example. In peacetime he or she writes long boring books that no one ever reads – I read one once and I couldn’t make head or tail out of it – and is feted for this skill. In wartime, he or she is completely useless. In a survival situation, he or she has almost no value whatsoever. I wasn’t going to allow such a person into Ingalls unless she was an unbelievably hot babe who was willing to serve as a breeder. We were going to need breeders and we weren’t going to need boring books on outdated political science. The world had turned upside down.

I discussed the definition of useful with Mac. Basically, we would take in doctors and other medical personnel, soldiers and policemen, builders and generally other people who would be useful. I gave Mac and the others some leeway. We had an expert on some obscure Middle Eastern civilisation turn up with a van full of supplies, believe it or not, which he successfully traded for admittance. He might not have been useful at the time, but he did turn into a pretty good worker in the long term. We also agreed that we would take in small children if they arrived. I wasn’t going to order anyone to shoot them.

Another digression here for people who are wondering why I wanted the children. Ingalls, like most small countryside towns – and Ingalls is tiny compared to New York City – tended to have larger families. Why? In Ingalls, and farming communities, children tended to be helping their families from a very early age and earning their keep. The cost of raising a child was offset, slightly, by the benefits a child brought to the family business. (And yes, a farm is a business. More on that later.) That wasn’t true of raising a child in the city. There, John and Jill Public would have to make some hard decisions if they found out that Jill was pregnant, such as which of them would give up their job to look after the kid. The end result was effectively inevitable. The city birth rates started to fall.

And Ingalls was a pretty safe place to have a kid. If more kids arrived, I could place them with families I *knew* would take them in and bring them up to contribute to the community. In the short term, they were a drain on our resources, but in the long term we were going to need the manpower. If that makes me sound like a calculating bastard, then...well, I guess I am a calculating bastard.

And I really didn’t want to shoot kids.

“Sir,” Sergeant Isaac Chang said, appearing behind us. Isaac wasn’t the only oriental in Ingalls, but there were only a bare handful of them. Ingalls was pretty much WASP territory, although there were a few exceptions like Jackson King. “I have the decontamination process set up now.”

I allowed him to lead us to the building he'd organised. Isaac had been part of the National Guard Company stationed in Ingalls and, at the moment, their effective commanding officer. The war had knocked everything out of kilter. He was trained as an NBC specialist – and so I was delighted to have him – but he wasn't that effective a Sergeant. I'd been better than him while I'd been in the Sandbox.

"Everyone who comes in, no exceptions, gets put through the showers," he said, firmly. The building had once belonged to a sporting club that had competed nationally. It was old enough not to have separate showers for men and women, seeing as the founders had decided that women wouldn't want to play such an unladylike sport. They'd gone bust a few years ago and abandoned the building to the tender mercies of a caretaker who had actually done a pretty good job. "They get stripped, washed and then dressed before the Doctor inspects them."

I exchanged salutes with a pair of his men, dressed in heavy-duty NBC suits rather than more standard uniforms. I felt a moment of pity for them – the dreaded suits had roasted more than a few of us back during the early march into Iraq – but I had to admit that they looked hugely intimidating, even more than the pair of heavily armed soldiers standing by the entrance to the building. The precautions sounded a little extreme, but they were vitally important. Fallout – which is basically radioactive dust – could get onto someone's clothes...and God help the poor bastard who breathed it in. Anyone who had been near a ground zero would have been exposed. My only consolation was that it was unlikely that we would see anyone who had been that badly exposed in Ingalls. The threat of radiation had been heavily exaggerated by the media before the Final War, but anyone who survived ground zero would probably have a heavy dose of radiation poisoning.

"Good work," I said, finally. Isaac beamed. He looked rather more like a geek than a soldier and I just knew that he had been having problems because of it. He wasn't, also, a resident of Ingalls. It had to have crossed his mind that he could be thrown out to find his own town, even though he was too important to waste. "What happens afterwards?"

"Once the Doctor has inspected them, we either push them back out or we take them into the town," Isaac said. "We can inspect their vehicles afterwards and check that they're not irradiated either, and then bring them into the town as well. The gas alone will be well-worth the effort of bringing them into the secure zone."

I nodded. We were going to run short of gasoline fairly quickly. Mac would have ensured that the cars he'd used in the blockade had been drained first – it actually is fairly easy to do that using a hand pump, rather than that particularly idiotic cartoon episode where Otto uses a straw to drain a bus's tank – but we were still short. I smiled, slightly. One of the little surprises we'd encountered in Iraq had been an idiotic insurgent who had *forgotten* to drain the gas tanks. His cars had blown up nicely.

A whistle blew. "Company's coming," someone shouted from the blockade. Mac had placed someone on higher ground where he could see down the road. I would have liked to have had some form of UAV, but sadly they hadn't been considered fitting equipment for a small town. If I'd had a few weeks to prepare for disaster...I shook the thought aside as wishful thinking and ran down towards Mac's command post.

“Ed,” Mac said, when I arrived. He was staring towards a set of minivans, driving towards us rather erratically. My first thought was that they were being shot at, but I couldn’t see anyone following them. The last time I had seen anything like that had been an ambushed convoy in Iraq. The ambusher had been ambushed in turn by us and shot to pieces. “Do you want to take the lead?”

“You know what you’re doing,” I said, in reply. This was Mac’s game. He’d done all the hard labour of setting it up. “I won’t take over now.”

He snorted at me and stepped forward, barking orders. The majority of the guards got to their weapons and took up position, while others removed themselves from the scene. They’d be the reserve if we actually were attacked. I wasn’t expecting violence at once, but I knew that it wouldn’t be long before ‘every man for himself’ became the rule of law in the cities. It probably was already. The vans came onwards until they saw the signs and skidded to a halt.

The man who climbed out of the lead van looked terrible. He wore what had once been a several thousand-dollar suit, expertly cut and tailored. It now looked torn and broken, stained with blood. From the way he limped, I could tell that he had been in a fight. He had a gun stuffed into his belt, but I wouldn’t have bet money that he knew how to use it properly. I borrowed a pair of binoculars from one of the guards and scanned the vans carefully. They looked to be holding several entire families...and as if they had shot their way out of town. I could see several bullet holes and smashed windows.

Shit, I thought. This was going to be bad.

“Halt,” Mac bellowed, through a loudspeaker. It made a hugely intimidating noise. “You will remain where you are. Keep your hands in the air. Do not move or you will be shot!”

The man waited as Mac climbed over the blockade and advanced to meet him, weapon in hand. I followed, clutching my own pistol, so that I could hear the discussion. The man looked terrified, but when he saw my uniform, he almost collapsed in relief. I wondered, later, what he would have thought if he had known how many people I had ordered killed earlier in the day.

“You have to let us in, man,” he said, finally. It was hard to sort out information from his babbling, but it seemed that he was a real estate agent, with his family and a few of their friends. I wasn’t sure, then or ever, where he’d actually come from. “There’s nothing out there, but chaos.”

“I can’t,” Mac said, calmly. His smile had vanished behind a cold mask. “We barely have enough for ourselves. You will have to go someplace else.”

I tensed slightly. “But my children,” the man protested. “They can’t stand this...”

“I’m sorry,” Mac said, “but we can’t take them in. Leave.”

The man’s hand dropped to his pistol. Mac snatched it out of his hand before he could draw it, something for which I chewed him out later. Fighting over a gun is dangerous. The man cringed, as if he expected to be beaten with his own gun, but Mac merely held it away from him.

“You have to leave,” Mac repeated. “If you don’t, we will open fire.”

After a moment, the man turned and walked back to the vans.

I knew, then, that I was witnessing the death of America.

Chapter Eight

Democracy is a poor system of government at best; the only thing that can honestly be said in its favour is that it is about eight times as good as any other method the human race has ever tried. Democracy's worst fault is that its leaders are likely to reflect the faults and virtues of their constituents - at a depressingly low level.

-Robert A. Heinlein

“All right, settle down,” Mac snapped, a day later. The Town Hall was packed with residents, some angry, some fearful and all concerned. Normally, Town Meetings had only a few dozen visitors, but now it was standing room only. The Mayor and the leading families, including Mac’s, would make the decisions, but now the Mayor was dead and everything was up in the air. “Quiet down so we can get this meeting started.”

It took quite a bit longer than that, but finally the room was quiet. “The Mayor is dead, as you all know,” Mac said, quietly into the silence. The Mayor had been respected, if not always liked. His suicide came as a blow, not least because he hadn’t been the last person to die at his own hand. “The country is at war. We have to decide what to do. Ed, please take the stand.”

I stood up. I don’t like addressing people in public, not when everyone was desperately looking at me to save their lives and property, but there was no choice. The only other person who knew as much as I did was Mac, or perhaps Isaac Chang, but I couldn’t stand down in their favour. I had accepted the post back when it involved little more than arresting someone who’d had too much to drink and I couldn’t stop now.

“This is what we know,” I said, and ran briefly through what we’d picked up before all communications had been lost. The effects of the EMP pulses had been variable, and quite a few of the tactical radios seemed to be working, but the air was full of static. They barely worked at anything above a local level and if there was someone broadcasting out in the wildness, we never heard them. Not then. “The war may be over, or it may be still going on, but we have to deal with the consequences.”

I paused. “As far as we can make out, law and order has completely collapsed,” I continued. We’d interviewed a handful of refugees we’d taken in and their stories had been uniformly horrific. The entire country seemed to be dissolving into terror and horror. “We are on our own. We may be able to link up with other towns and villages later, but the Federal and State Governments appear to have been destroyed.”

“So much for the fucking IRS,” someone shouted, from the rear.

“And so much for everything else,” I snapped. I wasn’t too unhappy about the demise of the Internal Revenue Service myself – I doubted that anyone apart from its employees would have been upset – but matters were too serious for jokes. “We are on our own. There will be no supplies from outside. There will be no seed corn, no artificial insemination for the cows, no more weapons and ammo, no more...”

I listed several dozen items that we depended upon...and came in from outside. I had ordered all kinds of tiny matters, such as collecting brass casings for reloading, that might help stretch out our supplies, but very few of them would be effective in the long term.

Those guards at the stores had come in very useful already. If we had a panic, we were going to be fucked. There was plenty of coal about, luckily, but we were going to be short on a great many other things. What would happen when we ran out of everything else...?

"That can't be right," Marc Schneider protested. I kept my face blank, with an effort, but others weren't so shy about showing their feelings. Marc wasn't a popular man in Ingalls. He'd been something in the city – I had a feeling that it was something that a gentleman's gentleman had been employed to scrape off his master's shoe – and had made enough money to buy a house in Ingalls and generally make a nuisance of himself. It occurred to me that, now, there would be nothing stopping us from lynching him...except me. There were times when I wished I didn't have such a sense of duty. "I know the country has taken a beating, but the government isn't going to fall so quickly, is it?"

"The government has been seriously damaged," I said. I had a nasty feeling that I was understating the case. It would have been easy to take refuge in believing that it would all be over in a few weeks and we could return to normal, but I knew better. "Even if the President is still alive, he's in no state to take control of the country. The cities have been blasted and thousands upon thousands of refugees will be spilling out into the countryside. Some of them will be carrying fallout with them."

There was no dissent. Everyone knew that we had been turning away what refugees arrived at Ingalls. A couple hadn't taken the hint and had had to be chased away with precisely aimed shots. Don't get me wrong; Ingalls wasn't one of those places that really hate outsiders – although most people made an exception for Marc and his snooty wife – but most of them lived close enough to the land to understand how fragile everything had become. We were on the verge of being fucked.

Mac spoke into the silence. "I propose that we move at once to place ourselves on a full defence position," he said. "I also nominate that Ed takes command of our defences and planning our survival."

"He can't do that," Marc injected, quickly. The big man looked honestly shocked. "He killed over a thousand men..."

"All of whom deserved it," Mac snapped back, angrily. If there had been any *real* second-guessing to be done, Mac would have done it. "Or would you have suggested feeding them all here, so close to the children and young girls? Or would you have suggested leaving them in a well-stocked prison with all the guns and food they could possibly want to produce an army? We would have been bowing the neck to them within a year, if we survived."

"But *can* we survive?" Tom Spencer asked. He was semi-retired, like many others in Ingalls, and normally drove the school bus. A more caring person it would be hard to find. "If a nuclear war has taken place, aren't we all going to die anyway?"

I paused, composing my thoughts. "A lot of us will die," I said, grimly. "The cities will become charnel houses very quickly. Disease and deprivation will stalk the land like...two giant stalking things." That got a nervous laugh, as I had hoped. Personally, I blame Mac's low taste in television. "We have farms out here, though, and enough of a position to defend that we would have a good chance of holding out, if we start making plans now. We have

weapons and we have an organised defence force. We can hold out long enough for most of our enemies to die.”

I explained as quickly as I could. The cities were almost-certainly write-offs now, as far as we were concerned. They had once been the heart of the United States, but now they were just burning embers. Oh, large parts of the cities would have survived, but they were no longer tenable as part of the country. The supply network that kept them fed would have been destroyed. The countryside, however, was a different matter. We could rebuild what we could, if we survived the coming year, and eventually rebuild the country. It wasn't going to be easy – my decision to execute the prisoners was going to be the least of what we would have to do – but we had to try. It wasn't in me to just give up.

“He’s right,” Rebecca Piazza said. I was surprised by her support, for Rebecca was another character. She’d come to Ingalls five years ago with a small group of followers to establish a commune. A taste of living without modern conveniences had convinced about a third of them that the sinful cities were better places to live, while another third had ended up being arrested on various drug-related charges, encouraging most of the remainder to leave before the law caught up with them as well. Rebecca and a pair of young men had stayed, struggling to survive and somehow eking out an existence. “We could establish a whole new world order.”

“With him in command, no doubt,” Marc said, sourly.

“Well, I for one support Ed,” Herman said. He glared at Marc, for the two men were old enemies. Herman was the local gun store owner and the most extreme gun fanatic in the area, which took some doing. He’d never been a soldier, unlike most of the population, but no one questioned his knowledge. He had supplied the entire Jail Posse with standardized weapons. Rumour had it that he had enough guns and ammo to fight a civil war. “He knows what he’s doing.”

“As do I,” Simon Horvat agreed. Simon owned the largest General Store in Ingalls, which, despite bitter competition from Wal-Mart, still managed to make a profit. His service made up for higher prices, in pretty much everyone’s view. “I second the nomination.”

There was a brief buzz of debate, but there were no other candidates. Mac was nominated for the job by someone who owed his family a favour, but declined it, while Walter Loy – the local High School teacher – accepted the nomination, but lost. I wasn't entirely happy about that. Walter was a fairly decent sort who actually wanted to make sure that kids learned something and, unlike me, was better at convincing people to go along with him...

“But it’s useless,” someone protested, at the rear. The despair in his voice surprised even me. “America is dead!”

“No, it’s not,” I said, genuinely angry for the first time since the meeting had begun. I had heard enough from defeatists in Iraq, mainly people who had done their fighting in Washington. “America is *not* dead. America isn’t the cities, or the land, or the President, or even the Stars and Stripes. America is the *people*!”

I touched my heart gently. “America exists here, in all of us, and as long as we are alive and true to ourselves, America won’t die,” I said, allowing my voice to grow louder. “We can

rebuild the country and make it great again if we have faith in ourselves and don't give up. Americans are not quitters!"

There were plenty of people in foreign nations that would have disagreed with that, but it didn't matter, not now. The nomination was confirmed quickly and I found myself in command of the defence and rebuilding effort. Mac was nominated for Mayor – someone was earning their patronage tonight – but declined it again, leaving Walter Loy to be nominated. That wasn't a bad thing, as far as I was concerned. I liked Walter.

"All right," I said, once order had been restored. Having talked the talk, it was now time to walk the walk. I'd spent several hours thinking about how to proceed and then discussing it with Mac, who had had his own suggestions. It wasn't going to be easy. The reason the original Jail Posse had been so large had been because some of the members might not be able to make it if there was a real emergency. They included farmers, engineers and other people we were going to need elsewhere. They couldn't be risked on the battlements. "Here is what we are going to do.

"First, and most important, we are going to start a rationing system," I said. "Simon, I think, will be in charge of that. People who work get fed. We'll organise the manpower allocations over the next few days, but a lot of people are going to have to be reallocated pretty quickly.

"Second, I'm going to have to conscript most of the boys from the school," I continued. There were around four hundred boys who could be considered military age if one squinted a bit. It was against the new International Law – as opposed to the far more practical older International Law, but no one followed that these days, apart from the West – but I didn't care. I would sooner have the boys alive and fighting than dead. "We're going to have to strengthen the borders as soon as possible. The Jail Posse can't stay on duty forever."

This provoked more argument. Small towns, as I may have mentioned, tend to be more patriotic than the bigger cities, and no, not because bigger cities tend to be more liberal. Ingalls had sent away thousands of young men – and dozens of young women – to various wars, almost as long as the town itself had been in existence. Ingalls had sent men to the Civil War – we were very even-handed; nearly a third of our recruits went South – the Spanish War, the First and Second World Wars and most of the conflicts since then. Mac himself had fought in Iraq and Afghanistan and he had a brother and two cousins who had been overseas when the Final War began. God alone knows what happened to them.

But they didn't like the thought of conscripting their young men, rather than the veterans, to man the barricades. I didn't like the thought either, but there was no choice. The veterans would be used as the hard core of the defences, of course, but they were also needed elsewhere. Ray Thompson, one of the Section Leaders, was also a highly-experienced Civil Engineer. I was going to need him, so should I have sent him out to be shot at by refugees and the raiders I knew would be coming?

It wasn't elitist, as some people alleged about the protection details surrounding our commanding officers in Iraq, but a matter of sheer practicality. A man like Ray – or General David Petraeus – is too valuable to risk needlessly. They had spent years developing their art and couldn't be wasted on sentry duty. It sounds harsh, but I would sooner waste a PFC than a General, unless the General was a real incompetent. The Army wasn't always good at

ensuring that the right people got promoted and was a living embodiment of the Peter Principle; men and women always rise to the level of their own incompetence.

“And we are going to have to tighten our boarders,” I continued, once *that* argument had been concluded. Democracy in action can be an ugly thing. “We cannot take more refugees in than we can handle.”

A dry cough snapped my attention to the Reverend Thomas McNab. He was Mac’s second cousin – or something; I was never quite sure how they were related – and the President of the Board of Deacons of the First Baptist Church. He was also the preacher at the church, which counted about a third of the population as members. He was pretty much the leader of Ingalls’ religious society and, therefore, a person regarded with considerable respect. He looked a little like Dermot Morgan.

I eyed him carefully. I respected Thomas; he was a decent man who never compromised his principles, but I was never a great respecter of organised religion. I believed in God, but not in his human servants. The Mullahs who had led the insurgency against us in Fallujah had been nothing, but a criminal racket, dressed up in the robes of Islam. They’d taken their cut from each hit, each tribute and everything else the followers had done, while urging them out to die against us. You don’t want to know what they did with the women and young boys...

“You are talking about turning away folks in need,” he said, gravely. He would have gone far as a politician if he hadn’t felt that politics was an unworthy role. “Do we not have an obligation to help those in need, as the Good Samaritan helped the Jew?”

I hesitated for a moment. “The Good Samaritan, Father, was in no danger,” I said, finally. “Every new mouth we take into our care will be a drain on our resources, which are limited enough. If we can hold out long enough to start bringing in a new crop and cooperating with other towns and villages, we can care for more, but we cannot sacrifice ourselves to help others.”

Thomas scowled, but accepted the point.

I ran through the rest of my agenda quickly, effectively creating a Cabinet. Neil Frandsen, the *de facto* head of the farmers in the area, became Farming Manager, with the responsibility of coordinating with the other farmers to provide food. Rebecca, who had had some success with microfarming, joined him. Herman ended up doing logistics and weapons production, although he had warned me that when we started to run out of bullets, we were going to be in serious trouble. The various armouries, gun clubs and suchlike had had plenty of supplies, but once they were gone, they were gone. Replacing them would be difficult. Simon agreed to carry on as rations manager and a handful of other tasks. Walter had some ideas for weapons that could be produced with what we had. Marc angled for an appointment, but didn’t even get close to winning any support. God alone knew what would become of him in the future.

“All right,” I said, finally. There was a new sense of real hope in the room. Perhaps we could survive after all. “Let’s get on with it, shall we?”

We didn’t know about the Death Zones yet.

Only that can excuse our optimism.

Chapter Nine

Majority rule will only work if you're considering individual rights. You can't have five wolves and one sheep vote on what they want to have for supper.

-Larry Flynt.

I should have known about the Death Zones. I have no excuse.

They were forming all over the world, zones where all human life was dying, swept away by the devastation. I saw so little, at the time, from Ingalls, but we were incredibly lucky. We were just far enough from the big cities, utterly unsustainable in the face of the calamity that had struck the entire world, to avoid the worst of the effects. Others were not so lucky.

The Russians – and us, and everyone else – had three different kind of nuclear weapon delivery system. I won't trouble you with the technobabble. Some of it is actively misleading, either purposefully or otherwise, while other parts are little more than notes that were proved useless in the face of the war. I'll treat them as simply as possible and call them short, medium and long-range weapons. The short-ranged weapons were tactical nukes, deployed mainly against opposing armies, the medium-ranged weapons were intended for use in Europe, while the long range weapons were intended to be fired at the continental United States. The Russians mainly used ICBMs for that purpose, although they had a hard core of bombers for more precise strikes. I wouldn't have wanted to be one of those pilots. They might have been able to reach the United States, but they couldn't return home...

(The Russians also based a squadron of Blackjack bombers on Cuba. They were all destroyed within hours of the war beginning. Ironically, their destruction might have helped spark off the first nuclear exchanges. Our own bombers were much more capable, but very few of them made it out of Russian airspace alive. Those that returned home found a devastated country.)

Let's start with Europe. Britain had served as a rear-area supply base for NATO forces – which effectively meant us, although they also hosted French and German air forces after their bases were bombed and shelled out of existence – and was a priority target for the Russians. The British had had one great advantage over the years in their geopolitics. It was very difficult, almost impossible, for any attacker to cross the English Channel and reach the heart of their power. Hitler's plans for invading Britain were founded on wet sand. Even during the worst days of the Cold War, it was predicted that conventional warfare would barely touch Britain, but that left the nukes. The British Government, as I have mentioned, barely even considered home defence. Their population was certainly unprepared for nuclear war.

I have already said that the Russians didn't go after civilian populations purposely. That game was only played by terrorists and states like North Korea, which barely had enough nukes – and the ones they had were far from accurate – to be considered a nuclear power. They didn't intentionally target the British civilian population either, but in Britain, there were far too many vital targets that were close to civilian population centres. The result was a devastating series of blows against millions of innocent people. London, the British capital, was struck by over seven warheads – it would have been nine, if records are to be trusted, but two failed to detonate – and was utterly devastated. Manchester, Birmingham, Liverpool, Edinburgh, Glasgow...all were targeted by the Russians, just for hosting vital targets. Other

nukes fell outside the population centres, striking at British military bases and industrial plants. The British didn't have military bases as big as our own. The effects were proportionally worse. The British Government, what was left of it, tried to declare an extreme and draconic state of emergency...and proved completely unable to enforce it. Just like our own government, they were overwhelmed by the sheer scale of the crisis. A single nuclear strike would have been bad enough, but this was worse. Their government melted away too...

And the population stumbled out into the zone of death. When I'd been a kid, I'd walked eight miles with Uncle Billy and thought it a great achievement. It had been petty compared to what I'd had to undergo to become a Marine and even smaller compared to some of the forced marches we had pulled in Iraq. The civilian population, eating their way through their sometimes-contaminated supplies at an incredible rate, fell out into the countryside and stripped it bare. They thought, as our own population thought, that farms equalled food. They raged out across the landscape like a pack of wild locusts and stripped it bare. Sometimes, the farmers successfully defended their farms, but mostly the population ate...and then starved anyway. Civilisation had collapsed completely. Apart from the King, who had taken shelter in Ireland, and the lucky survivors who made it to Ireland or one of the other islands, the vast majority of the English population was wiped out.

The Scots fared better, marginally. The lowlands of Scotland were devastated, but the highlands had been barely touched, directly. Indirectly, there were plumes of fallout drifting northwards, poisoning far too many crops, or sheep. The only places in the United Kingdom that could be said to have fared well were the Hebrides. Despite the best efforts of successive governments, enough remained of the island spirit to allow them to hold on, struggling to survive. They, like us, developed a ruthless attitude to refugees. They had no choice.

Across the Channel, the story was worse. The French had been the victims of most of the Russian medium-ranged weapons, not least because they'd been the ones who'd nuked Moscow. They might have had a bigger country, proportionally speaking, than the British, but they were hit worse. The French government actually managed to survive – having decamped to a bunker when the balloon went up – but they only made matters worse. They, like the British and us, simply didn't have the tools to enforce their will. What little resources they did have were consumed in ethnic war as refugees swarmed across the Mediterranean and into France. The Spanish, who had only taken a handful of nukes, fared better, but not by much. They had a massive refugee problem to cope with...

The Germans, Poles and Russians were effectively destroyed. The Germans had taken the brunt of most of the tactical nukes that had been deployed in the early stages of the exchange. The Poles had been unlucky enough to have Russian forces on their soil that were targeted by NATO tactical nukes as they marched eastwards, after having had said forces looting their way across Poland. Their government had been in exile during the later stages of the war and never returned to Poland. They'd been hit too hard to survive. As winter drifted across Europe, most of the survivors froze or tried to reach safer climes. Very few made it.

And the Russians? We'd spent years and trillions of dollars planning how we would destroy them if we ever had a nuclear war with them. We'd thought, back during the Cold War, that the Russians had a massive nuclear advantage. We'd been wrong; we had the advantage, not them. Our panic had been misplaced because we'd believed too much of the Russian propaganda about how strong they were. By the time we realised that we'd been played, we

had amassed enough firepower to destroy Russia several times over, along with most of the Warsaw Pact. (To add insult to injury, the Russians also came up with a plan to destroy the Warsaw Pact. Unlike NATO, it was a forced association of slave countries – colonies, in all, but name – and the Russians had good reason to surprise their loyalty. Look how quickly they bolted when the Russian bear grew too weak to hold them.) The war saw the smooth execution of the war plans...and the execution of almost the entire Russian population. We hit them so hard that they never recovered.

Oh, they'd put more thought into civil defence than we had, but it wasn't enough. It couldn't be enough. They could and did save thousands of lives in bomb shelters under Moscow, but once they ran out of supplies, they were dead. We'd destroyed all of their government and most of their army and what was left turned bandit. They're still not back up as I write this book. They lost all, but five percent of their population.

The Chinese were in a slightly better state. The Russians had slaughtered most of their city population. Their farms had barely been targeted, so they managed to hold out under a handful of warlords until the death zones had completed their grizzly work. They had another advantage. Taiwan had largely survived the war and managed to coordinate recovery operations. They also ended up helping Japan and Korea, although the latter was suffering the largest proportional die-off in the entire war. North Korea had never worked. It fell apart as soon as the nukes started to fly and almost the entire population died.

And then there were the Arabs. I'm not that fond of Arabs, as a general rule. Back when I was in Iraq, I found that I tended to like the insurgents more than I liked the civilians, although that feeling sputtered out when the first bunch of insurgents – former regime loyalists and army soldiers who'd been dumped onto the streets – faded out to be replaced by terrorists, criminals and fanatics. There's no biological difference between Arabs and any other human race, but most of them are raised in a way that makes it very difficult for them to become good and productive people. They're good soldiers when the battle plan is working, but when the battle plan falls apart, so do they. They are not taught to take individual responsibility for their own actions, let alone show initiative on the battlefield. Their governments encourage this and I suppose, if I were an Arab tyrant, I would encourage it as well. An Arab army that thinks is a dangerous army. They might start thinking about how easy it would be to launch a coup. It has happened on occasion.

The Arabs had been hit badly by the Israelis and lost most of their cities and military bases. Their societies just came apart. There was almost no trust in their systems outside the family – look at Saddam's most trusted people and you'll find that most of them were related to him, poor bastards – and their governments had never believed in their duty to their people. They'd built their cities on sand – quite literally – and when the nukes went off, most of the population died. Matters were not helped, in Saudi Arabia, by the Shia rising in revolt. They won, largely because the Army and National Guard were dying a slow and painful death. The only Middle Eastern group to actually come out ahead were the Kurds. The Turks had too much else to worry about. The Russians, who didn't like them very much, had hit them with a dozen nukes and their country was falling apart. Peace with the Kurds was better than war.

Israel might have been all right, apart from Palestine. There was an immediate collapse in Palestine as foreign aid dried up and news spread of the nuclear strikes. When it was realised that Mecca, the holiest city in Islam, had been nuked, the religious fanatics started preaching

death to Israel – again. The population rose up and marched on Israel, fired on by the ranting of their preachers and, as is almost traditional in modern-day Arab societies, the presence of guns at their backs. The factions that had refused to make peace on terms everyone could swallow, if not like, were screaming for blood. They knew that if their patrons had been destroyed, their rule wouldn't last long, even if the Israelis were destroyed.

It was like something out of the First World War. Wave after wave of humanity poured against the Israeli defences, who found themselves pushed back by sheer weight of numbers and forced to deploy everything from gas to napalm to keep the crowds back. Hamas and Hezbollah fired thousands of rockets into Israel – you know, the rockets that didn't exist for the western news media – in hopes of breaking Israeli resistance. It didn't break. There was enough footage of Israelis who were caught by surprise being torn apart, or raped to death, to keep them fighting. The slaughter went on for days and consumed almost all of the Israeli ammunition. They found themselves being pushed back and back...and they almost lost. General Hunger and General Thirst had won the war Israel came so close to losing. The Arabs simply couldn't go on. They melted away on the verge of victory and died in their tens of thousands. The Arab-Israeli Conflict was over.

(Today, Israelis won't speak of their role in the Final War. I think they're ashamed of it. That's not uncommon among those who survived the Final War, doing whatever they had to do to stay alive. Greater Israel is at peace with her remaining neighbours and long may it stay that way.)

And then there were the plagues.

No, I don't know where they came from. I've heard hundreds of theories, but as most of them were comparable to 'the white man invented AIDS to keep the black man down' I tend to disbelieve them when I first hear them. Personally, I think most of the plagues came from the thousands upon thousands of dead bodies lying around, although there are other explanations. My own personal favourite, the one I think might have an element of truth, is that they came from the Russians, or perhaps the Iranians. The former had kept a massive biological warfare program online – despite solemnly promising not to keep one going – while the latter was looking desperately for some way to even the odds between us and them. Saddam, too, strove to create biological weapons, although after the Iraq War everyone knew that the weapons didn't exist. That was partly true. His program had been dissembled. The plagues might even have been a belated revenge.

But it doesn't matter. More effort has been put into determining the origin of the plagues than any other issue, but it doesn't matter to us, not now. All that matters is that, somehow, one of them got loose, or someone deliberately spread the disease. I could see the Russians doing that. They'd already started a nuclear exchange, so why not go for the rest of the taboo weapons? What more did they have to lose?

It could have been worse. It would have been worse if normal air and sea traffic had still been functioning. One of the more boneheaded problems with *Protect and Survive* was its assertion that after a nuclear war, the survivors could resume normal activities. Come on! They've been nuked out of health and home. They have barely any food. If they were too close to ground zero, they may have radiation poisoning as well. They're not going to be getting on the buses – which have all been destroyed – and travelling to work, which might

also have been destroyed. It was sheer idiocy! As it happened, the diseases didn't have a chance to spread...

I'll need a slight digression here. Biological warfare is not quite as easy as films and horror stories make it out. A disease that kills its host before its host can pass it on to other people will burn itself out very quickly, simply by exterminating the pool of carriers. A disease that goes too far in the opposite direction, one that doesn't kill its hosts, is useless as a weapon. The ideal is to strike a balance between timing – so that it has a chance to spread – and lethality. It is *much* harder than it is in the movies.

And the plagues spread throughout the death zones, and Africa. Africa had been barely touched by the Final War – although North Africa took a hammering from Israeli nukes – but the plagues were no respecter of neutrality. They raced down from the north to the south, killing as they went, before they burned out. Africa was almost uniquely vulnerable. They didn't have a real vaccination program in many places, while many more had bad governments and depended on outside aid, all of which had been cut off. The plagues only made a bad situation, with millions on the verge of starvation, worse. Rumours ran wild; it was a Jewish weapon, or an Afrikaner weapon, or an American weapon, or even the anger of Allah. Religious strife and warfare followed in its wake. The plagues didn't care. Places that didn't or couldn't instigate a strict quarantine were touched and suffered hundreds of further casualties.

It would be nice to say that things were settling down, but in many places, it was only the silence of the grave. Entire populations had been wiped out. The handful of survivors in Europe and the Middle East were surviving by holding out against thousands upon thousands of desperate refugees. Those that were broken were exterminated and thousands more died. Ireland, the only major European country not to suffer a nuclear attack, had problems of its own. They were swamped by refugees from Britain. There are hundreds of stories from the time of chaos and most of them end badly.

We'd been lucky. The Russians simply didn't have many long-ranged weapons, although they had been able to fire hundreds of nukes at us. We also had more space between the cities and the countryside. Many – but not all – of the nukes had gone off away from civilian population centres. We had a chance to survive and rebuild, provided only that we held out for long enough.

It wasn't going to be easy.

The next few weeks showed us how grim it was going to become.

Chapter Ten

I also think there are prices too high to pay to save the United States. Conscription is one of them. Conscription is slavery, and I don't think that any people or nation has a right to save itself at the price of slavery for anyone, no matter what name it is called. We have had the draft for twenty years now; I think this is shameful. If a country can't save itself through the volunteer service of its own free people, then I say: Let the damned thing go down the drain!
-Robert A. Heinlein

I don't like using conscript soldiers any more than Heinlein did.

When I'd been in the Marines, I'd volunteered and yes, there were times when I cursed that decision. It was a hellish time, in many ways, and yet...I had volunteered to allow the Drill Sergeants to break me down and rebuild me into a Marine, or at least the larvae of one. (I didn't understand that until I'd actually been under fire.) It was my own choice, even if it had been a stupid one, and by the time I had completed the course, I knew that it wasn't a stupid choice. Looking back, I wonder how I could ever have been so naive.

But the same wasn't true for the conscripts. Ingalls had a high school with roughly four hundred pupils of military age, with a little fiddling. Some of them were unfit and would have to be put through heavy exercise to make them slim down, although there weren't as many of them as there would have been in a city. Country life doesn't tend to lead to fatties, although the stereotype of the jolly fat farmer's wife is still with us. Some of them had intended to seek a career in the military, or at least go see the elephant before being discharged, but others hadn't wanted anything to do with the military. At least two of them had rebelled against parental pressure to join the military and had embraced a radical lifestyle instead, although they hadn't really gone that badly off the rails. They wouldn't have lasted long in the *really* dark places in New York. It didn't matter. The point was that few of them had volunteered to be turned into soldiers.

I didn't like that. I'd fought conscripts in Iraq and most of them had been piss-poor soldiers. They'd had to be driven into battle at gunpoint. The British had done better, back in the First World War, with conscripts treated the same as volunteers, once they had been called up to battle. They hadn't had such a finely-tuned training program as the modern-day USMC, but by the end of the war, the BEF had been the most powerful force on the planet. The Arab armies that relied on conscripts had often proven nothing, but broken weeds. The Arab armies that *didn't* use conscript labour often had manpower shortages. The Chinese came up with the saying 'good iron is not used to make a nail, nor a good man to make a soldier' but I'd have been surprised if there wasn't a comparable Arab saying. Conscripts who didn't want to be there and weren't properly supported could turn into disasters.

And the last thing I wanted was to be shot in the back by someone who resented training, or that I'd put him on the front lines.

There was little choice, as I said, but I still wasn't comfortable with the decision. I'd mainly put training in the hands of other veterans from the town – it might have been a mistake, in hindsight, but it wasn't as if I could recruit training officers from Texas – and supervised as best as I could. We'd left out most of the training that a regular American soldier would undergo, not least because we represented about a dozen or more different services or combat units between us, but we focused on the important issues. They learned how to shoot – most

of them already knew – and they learned how to follow orders. Their appearance was a joke – God knows, if we actually did go to war, they certainly wouldn't *look* like soldiers – but they were learning. They did have some problems learning to salute at the right time, but I could forgive them that, as long as they did their duty. Besides, it can be dangerous to be saluted in a combat zone. A watching sniper might see that you were in command and put you out of play, permanently.

“Hey, boss!”

I turned to see Rose coming up behind me. Like many of us these days, she wore body armour, with a mask covering most of her face. A great shame, in my view, but the last thing I wanted was for people to start breathing in fallout if the winds changed sharply. I'd had Sergeant Isaac Chang give everyone a tense lecture on the realities of fallout, as opposed to the myths and legends, and some people were starting to relax. I wasn't sure if I approved of that, but...

“Rose,” I said, cheerfully. I'd barely seen her in the last two days, in-between organising the training periods and supervising the defences. We'd had to shoot several people who had tried to force their way into the defences and drive away several hundred more. We'd also taken in forty men with experience or skills we needed and their families. Several of their sons had been added to the training soldiers. “What's up?”

She smiled dryly as she stopped beside me, barely breathing hard. “Another group just tried to cross country,” she said, meaning that they'd attempted to come around the defences. I wasn't sure if they were probing attacks or just random motion, but I had the nasty feeling that we were in for some trouble. “They retreated when they were challenged by a patrol.”

I nodded. Ideally, we would have had sensors scattered all around the perimeter, but that wasn't an option at the moment. The EMP effects seemed random – they weren't; anything that had been shielded, or protected in some other manner, had survived almost undamaged – but they had been real. The armoury hadn't had many sensors in the first place and most of them were useless now. I'd had patrols watching the approaches and, at nighttime, snipers waiting with NVGs. We'd shot several people who had attempted to approach at night.

“Good,” I said. I'd been wondering why I hadn't heard the shots. The world was so *silent* these days. I hadn't seen an aircraft in the skies since the Final War. “Well done.”

“Thanks,” Rose said, dryly. She'd been looking forward to staying in the city, but thanks to me, she hadn't...and it had saved her life. “I was talking about something with Deborah and she thought I should ask you.”

I lifted an eyebrow. Deborah was pretty much a grandmother to the entire town. Her kids had grown up and had started families of their own, but she'd embraced everyone. Non-judgemental, despite being a Deputy, she was everyone's friend and offered advice to anyone who needed it. I rather liked her myself. She was very far from the classic image of Mrs Grundy, who lived to spoil everyone's fun.

“I noticed the guards,” Rose said. I blinked. She'd been involved with setting the whole system up. Of *course* she had noticed the guards. “I also noticed the soldier-boys, and the men you had training them, and the men you had guarding the prison.”

I frowned, unsure of where this was going. I'd sent another section of men over to the prison as soon as possible, allowing some rotation of the guards, but I hadn't made much use of the prisoners yet. I wanted the prison empty – it was pretty much a perfect fortress for us, once modified a little – but I didn't have everything set up here to handle the prisoners. A handful had useful skills we could use, but I wasn't sure if I wanted to trust them as anything, but brute labour.

“Yes...?” I asked, finally.

“They're all *men*,” Rose said. I didn't bother to deny it. Apart from Rose, Deborah and a handful of others, they were all men. I'd also done my best to keep the women away from the front lines, such as they were. “Why haven't you conscripted any of the women?”

There were actually several possible answers to that question, but for once I was lost for words. I am not opposed to the idea of women in combat. Teaching women how to shoot, according to the Drill Sergeants, is easier than teaching men. (They were shouting at us after a slightly less-than-perfect drill, so they may have been exaggerating a little, but there was an edge of truth in it.) Women are often at much more risk than men on the battlefield and they tend to bear the brunt of occupation. Forget Iraq for that; *we* were far more civilised than we had any right to be. The Russians, when they invaded Germany in 1944-45, looted, raped and burned their way across the country. I thought – and still think – that an armed and deadly girl is the greatest possible deterrent to rape.

But I didn't want to lower standards either. A Marine, by the time he graduates, is a walking killing machine. We don't all look like steroid-abusing bodybuilders – Mac does, but he's not a Marine – but we're extremely tough. The requirements are harsh and – let's be blunt here – few women can hack them. A woman, all other things being equal, will lose a fight to a man. If we accepted women in the Marine Corps, with all the other issues that that implied, would we lose some of our fighting power?

(And, if we did accept women without lowering the standards, how few women would we get? How long would it be before we were urged to lower the barriers? I'd seen that happen in New York to allow for 'diversity.' The city had wanted to have more women and African-Americans in high positions, but instead of training them up – particularly the latter – they lowered standards instead. They did no one any favours. Those who earned their positions were suspected, unfairly, of having cheated. Those who didn't were treated with contempt.)

But that wasn't the real reason.

“We need to keep the women back,” I said, finally. Rose glared at me. I suspect that she thought I meant barefoot and pregnant in the kitchen. “Rose...”

“I am the second-best shot in your entire force,” Rose said, angrily. “I earned this position and I earned my promotion to the big city. Are you now telling me, and every other woman, that we're going to be disenfranchised permanently – again?”

I understood her anger. A woman in a position of power is a challenge to any man – and Rose, as a Deputy, had been challenged more than anyone else on the force. She had had to earn her reputation the hard way and now I was threatening that. Contempt from up above

would rapidly trickle down to the lower ranks and the rest of the town. Rose wasn't a Feminazi by any means, but she'd earned her position despite her sex. She wouldn't let me take it away without a fight.

"No," I said, grimly. "Listen..."

It wasn't an easy explanation to give. The only other person who knew was Mac, and Mac had been with me when we'd hashed it all out. The human race's total population had just fallen drastically. By my most optimistic calculations – which later proved to be far too optimistic- at least half the population of America and the entire world had been killed, or would die in the coming weeks and months. The human race might be down to a billion. I know that there were people who were ranting about overpopulation, but it struck me that the Final War hadn't been a particularly good solution...and it had killed the most productive sections of global society. In a way, despite my words earlier, it *had* killed America. Whatever we formed from the rubble would be very different in many ways.

But our priority would be building up our population again. I'd already started that when I'd arranged for children to be brought into Ingalls, even if their parents were denied access. That wouldn't last forever, though, but we'd still have whatever children were born into the community. They would be born into a very different world, but they'd be born and we were going to need them. We could not afford to waste a single breeder.

Look, one man can have children with as many women as he has the stamina for, assuming that he has enough women. Say, like in one of those space-age pornographic videos we were passing around, when it's one woman a day for the poor imprisoned man who has the job of fertilising them. Sounds terrible, right? One woman can only have one baby at a time. Yes, she could have twins or even triplets, but on average, one woman, one baby. Fifty women and one man wasn't a disaster. Fifty men and one woman was social collapse.

And there were plenty of ways things could go wrong. There was a small amount of fallout in the air and more might be on the way. A girl who breathed in too much fallout might miscarry, or worse, give birth to a mutated child. (And no, not like the X-Men. I'm talking about a child being born without limbs, or eyes, or in one extreme case a brain.) A pregnant woman who was underfed would pass on her problems to her child. A woman with AIDS or Cancer might infect their baby...there were too many possible problems to list. The child-bearing women had to be given the best of everything; the best food, the best drink, the best medical care and the best protection. We couldn't afford to lose even one to an enemy bullet. We had to keep them inside and cosseted. We had no choice.

I'd worked out the maths back after the Town Meeting. Ingalls had a population of around 3000 men and women. With additions, it might reach 4000 before we had to put a stop to all immigration for fear of succeeding ourselves to death. We had, roughly speaking, around 1200 women of child-bearing age (keeping it a little vague, of course; women can get pregnant very early on, but it's not always healthy) and another 400 or so who would grow into child-bearing age. They *had* to be protected. If they weren't protected, they might become infected and lose their ability to bear children, or be kidnapped by outsiders.

I have a feeling that problems like this are what started the whole 'subjection of women' thing. A woman who can bear children is a valuable commodity in a primitive age, or, for that matter, in modern-day Africa or the Middle East. She has to be protected, not only for

her own good, but for that of her family or tribe. The shocking devaluation of rape victims – personally, I preferred shooting the rapists – in such societies might have its origins in women who, when raped, could no longer bear children, or bore their rapist's child. I hated that kind of logic and even considering the fact that we might have no choice, but to embrace similar measures, shocked me. It was...well, un-American, un-Western, a direct offence against everything I held dear.

Rose listened, without saying a word, as I stumbled through the explanation. I could relax with her, but not then, not when she had to hear something she would find loathsome. I didn't blame her. If I'd been one of those porn stars in a Lombardi Production where I had to impregnate the entire tribe of women, I wouldn't have been happy either. Sex is a wonderful thing between a man and a woman – provided, of course, that you get between the right man and the right woman; all right, I'll be serious now – but I wouldn't want to cheapen it. I'd done too much crawling around whorehouses in my younger days.

"I see," she said, finally. "I have a proposal."

I listened as she outlined her own suggestions. They were simple enough. I had actually intended something similar, but I wasn't going to tell her that. The girls would get training in shooting – those who didn't know how to shoot before – and other training as well, making them far more than just barefoot and pregnant. They hadn't been barefoot and pregnant in the first place, but I didn't point that out to her either. She was on a roll. She also insisted on continuing mixed classes at the school, when it was reopened, just so that boys would see girls as more than just sexual partners. I took her point. I have a feeling, although I cannot prove it, that the general low regard for women in some parts of the world comes from lack of exposure.

And besides, if the women were defending their homes and families, they'd be more aggressive and determined than anyone else. Never get between a mother and her child. She'll tear you to bits if she gets a chance and never care about the cost. That's human nature. If I could take advantage of it...

My radio buzzed. "Ed, this is Mac at CP2," Mac's voice said. The static made it almost impossible to hear him. The nukes, or something, had screwed up reception no end. (Either that, or they were lousy radios. The National Guard didn't always get the best of equipment.) "I think we've got company coming."

"On my way," I said. It had to be serious if Mac was calling for me. He could normally handle anything to do with the refugees. "Rose, I'll deal with it as soon as I get back from this."

I turned and ran towards CP2. Trouble was definitely coming.

Chapter Eleven

Anyone who clings to the historically untrue — and thoroughly immoral — doctrine that “violence never solves anything” I would advise to conjure up the ghosts of Napoleon Bonaparte and of the Duke of Wellington and let them debate it. The ghost of Hitler could referee, and the jury might well be the Dodo, the Great Auk, and the Passenger Pigeon. Violence, naked force, has settled more issues in history than has any other factor and the contrary opinion is wishful thinking at its worst. Breeds that forget this basic truth have always paid for it with their lives and freedoms.

-Robert A. Heinlein

“There,” Mac said, as I reached the CP. The Command Post was a fancy name for the fallback position just above the defences, but it allowed us a good view down the road. “Company’s coming.”

I picked up my binoculars and peered through them. There was a small convoy of vehicles driving up towards us; a handful of SUVs, a pair of large trucks and, of all things, a school bus. At first, it looked like just another refugee convoy, but then I took in some of the markings on the bus. They looked, to me, to be suspiciously like bullet holes. My combat senses were tingling a warning. The last time I’d ever seen anything like this had been just before an insurgent had tried to ram a vehicle loaded with explosives through a gate I’d been guarding. The result of shooting the truck at long range hadn’t been pleasant.

“I see,” I said, finally. It would be bare minutes before they reached the first warning sign, but I was curious to know what they would do. If they were legitimate refugees in search of help and shelter, like we had seen before, they would probably be careful not to cause offence. They would stop and send something up to bargain with us. “They don’t look quite kosher, do they?”

I looked back at Mac as I lowered the binoculars. I had a nasty feeling that they’d hijacked the school bus, which suggested that it wasn’t the Army or the National Guard coming to tell us that everything was going to be fine. I hadn’t seen any evidence of organised recovery efforts – insofar as there could *be* recovery efforts – in the days since the Final War. Anyone like us would be trying to ride out the Death Zones and the die-off. They certainly wouldn’t be charging out to rebuild the country.

“Get the reserves up here,” I ordered, curtly, returning to study the approaching convoy. It might have been a mistake, but I preferred to be on the paranoid side. I wasn’t going to start shooting, but if they opened fire, I fully intended to win. “Check with the other posts and see if anyone else is coming to visit.”

“No, sir,” Mac said, slipping back into formality. It was almost refreshing since starting the training program. Formality was something of a joke with the conscripts. “They’re reporting that all’s clear down their way.”

“Good,” I said. An attack on all three command posts and the roads they guarded would have been a serious problem. Reserves could only be in one place at once. If I had to parcel them out, I’d run the risk of being overwhelmed at one of the posts and being forced back into Ingalls. A gun battle in the middle of the town would be disastrous, even if we won. “Bring up two of the machine guns as well. We might need their firepower.”

Mac nodded. The National Guard armoury we'd opened had included six M240 NATO machine guns and a considerable amount of ammo. It was something that worried me. Even the most disciplined soldier burned through machine gun ammunition at a terrifying rate and once it was gone, it would be hard to replace. Herman had assured me that he was working on ways to repack the cartridges and produce reloads, but I had my doubts. Firing off non-standard ammunition is asking for a jam in the middle of a fight. There was a reason we had tended to carry extra weapons while on patrol in Iraq.

"They're on their way," Mac said. I smiled in relief. We were lucky enough, at least, to have a pair of experts for each of the weapons, even though they were also needed elsewhere. We were going to have to train some of the kids up as machine gunners soon enough.

"Ed...they're stopping."

I turned back and lifted my binoculars again. The whole unwieldy convoy had slowed to a halt, horns blaring, and a small group of men climbed out for a brief conference. I watched with a certain amount of amusement. They either had no idea we were there, which was unlikely, or they were very confident that we wouldn't open fire. They were *well* within Patty and Stacy's range with their sniper rifles. We could have taken out the dismounts with ease.

"Not soldiers," I said, feeling a twinge of disappointment. It would have been a relief to know that there was still some functioning government around, even if some of the complaints about Washington and the IRS had been bitter. The government isn't set up to handle the problems of the smaller towns when there are so many voters in the larger cities. Neil's only demand when I appointed him Farming Secretary had been to keep out the Washington-inspired bullshit. "I don't think they're even anyone official."

Mac shrugged. "Why am I not surprised?" He asked, dryly. "Want to open fire now and put them out of our misery?"

"Not yet," I said, firmly. I'd spotted a change. "One of them is coming this way."

Showing considerable bravery – or, I suspected from the way he was walking – a certain knowledge of a gun pointed at his back, a man was walking towards us. I studied him through the binoculars and confirmed my first impression. That was a man who was *certain* that whatever he did, he was going to wind up dead. I'd seen expressions like that before, in Iraq, when their secret policemen had forced thousands of soldiers into battle against us. Most of them had died. Far too many of the secret policemen had escaped.

He wore what had once been an expensive suit, giving me a brief flashback to the first refugees we had turned away from Ingalls. He had probably been a banker, or a lawyer, before the war, but now...what was he now? I had a nasty suspicion that the key word was Judas Goat. That, too, we had seen in Iraq. He had been slightly overweight at one point, but now he looked sick, as if he were going to fall over at any moment. He looked as if he had walked out of Ethiopia, or another famine country, rather than America. It brought home to me just how much had changed in the last few days. He raised his hands as he passed the final sign and I made a decision.

"Cover me," I ordered, before Mac could protest. "I'm going down to meet him."

I chambered a round in my Desert Eagle before I clambered over the barricade and down onto the other side of the road. I'd inspected the defences before, of course, but looking at them with a force of possible hostiles just down the road was remarkably reassuring. It was in our interests to stall, I decided, and so I walked down slowly towards the man, uncomfortably aware of the snipers tracking our every move.

Up close, it was hard to look at him without feeling some kind of pity. His eyes were cold and utterly hopeless, as if he had lost everything that made life worth living, while I could see signs of a recent beating on his face. His suit was torn and tattered, while the way he squinted at me suggested that he had once worn spectacles and had lost them somewhere along the way. I'd seen that look before too, on the first refugees, and I felt an odd stab at my heart. How could I have turned them away?

I had – have – no choice, I reminded myself.

It didn't seem enough, somehow, compared to the desperate look in his eyes.

"That's far enough," I said, forcing an unaccustomed harshness into my voice. He looked like a dog that had just been kicked – again. Somehow, I was sure I knew just what was going on, and what had been done to him. "Who are you and what do you want?"

His voice was bitter, almost broken. "I've been sent with a message," he said, breathing harshly. Someone had broken his nose and – surprise, surprise – no one had attempted to give him proper medical care. Someone, I decided, was going to pay for that. "They want food and drink, women and a place to stay. If you agree to allow them to take what they want, they won't hurt you. If you fight, they'll reduce the entire town to rubble and drag your women into slavery, like..."

He almost broke at that point. "Like my wife," he said, forcing the words out. "They have my wife!"

I felt no pleasure at being proved right. Life could be a right bitch, sometimes. I suspected I knew the rest of the story, but I had to ask anyway. If I played it properly, I would have a chance to learn more about our new enemies than they expected. They'd done something smart, sending a slave up to talk to us, but slaves...well, do you know what the Romans used to call their slaves? The tool that *thinks*. Slaves, despite the best efforts of Confederate apologists, don't like being slaves. Give them a chance at victory, or push them too far, and you have a revolt on your hands. It can be a very dangerous risk for a society to take.

"I see," I said, as sympathetically as I could. "Who are *they*?"

The remainder of the story trickled out slowly. He was a patent attorney back before the war and he'd been out in the countryside on a holiday with his wife and two children. They'd been thrown out of whatever town they had been staying in – probably rated as four additional mouths to feed – and had been reduced to wandering the country when they had been captured by the gang. *They*, it turned out, had been a street gang back before the war, but they'd been smart enough to escape and run for their lives in the chaos after the bombs had fallen...

And now they wanted Ingalls.

Over my dead body, I decided, and considered. I could have signalled Mac to open fire, but that would have exposed the man to our fire as well as that of his tormentors. I would also be caught in the crossfire – not a particularly comfortable place to be – and would have to crawl for my life. I thought about just saying no and suggesting that they left, but that would have left them free to pillage someplace else. It was heartening to know that we weren't the only organised community left – I'd been sure of it, but it was nice to *know* – but I didn't want to send a pack of angry gang-bangers on to the next town. They might be in a worse state.

The matter was decided for me by one of the gang members. He must have gotten suspicious of how much we were chattering and came striding up, carrying an AK-47 under his arm. It looked, to my inexperienced eye, like a cheap knock-off, carried mainly for prestige rather than firepower. I'd seen that sort of thinking before, in Afghanistan. Men with Stinger missiles, left over from their war against the Soviet Union, had refused to use them against Coalition forces, because that would have instantly demoted them from 'big man' to 'common or garden fighter,' if that.

He looked hungry, too, and there was a nasty glint in his eye. He seemed to be a mixed-race child, showing signs of both Asian and African somewhere in his bloodline, but that might have been a trick of the light. He wore an ill-fitting policeman's shirt – we didn't find out until later where *that* had come from – and looked as if he had been through hell. I suppose the effect was meant to be intimidating. I'd seen more frightening people in my life. Uncle Billy had been nice and very polite to my mother, but he'd been one of the most dangerous people I'd ever met. The gang-banger only scared people who didn't know how to fight back.

"You," he said, addressing the lawyer, "get back in the bus. Now."

I watched the lawyer scuttle off, and then turned my attention back to the gang-banger. He posed for a moment, aware that I was watching, and I considered trying to look afraid, but I decided that it wasn't worth the effort. Besides, he couldn't see them, but I could see the two red dots on his forehead, marking out the sniper targets. I decided not to look at them any longer. They left me wanting to giggle. If he had known how close he was to death...

"Right," he said. His voice was thick, the voice of a man used to getting what he wanted from people, or else. "You know what we want, so give it to us, or else."

"No," I said. I suppose I should have said something dramatic, or defiant, but I couldn't be bothered. There are a thousand versions of this story and most of them have me saying 'nuts,' or 'fuck off,' but their accuracy is disputable. Besides, 'nuts' was taken when it comes to American myths. "I want your surrender."

He looked at me as if I were insane. "You're demanding *my* surrender?" He demanded, astonished. "Do you know who we are?"

"No," I said, tightly. "I see you as nothing, but thugs. You can put down your guns, release your prisoners, and work off your debt to society, helping us all to survive." I smiled, coldly. "Or you can fight and die."

He lifted his AK-47 and started to aim it at me. He wasn't thinking. The AK-47 is a magnificent weapon in its way, but using it for close quarters is just plain dumb, most of the time. It wouldn't have mattered anyway. I made a gesture with my hand and a pair of shots cracked out, perfectly synchronised. Patty and Stacy blew his head off with ease. His body collapsed to the ground, although not before I'd snatched the AK-47 from his dying hands and slung it over my shoulder. We were, after all, desperately short of weapons.

The gang-bangers seemed to hesitate, just for a second. I had wondered if they would turn around and try to escape – which would have made intercepting them difficult, as we had only a very limited supply of mortar rounds and AT weapons – but instead they unasssed from their vehicles and took cover, firing towards me. I'd hit the ground the moment they started to unass and crawled rapidly back towards the barricades, while the snipers fired careful shots into their mass. They'd be slowed down long enough for us to get additional forces in place and then to deal with them permanently. After what they'd done, I wasn't going to let them off with a warning, no sir!

“You, sir, are fucking insane,” Mac said, when I scrambled back over the barricade. The gang was still getting organised below us, so I took a moment to check the AK-47. As I had suspected, it was probably from a knock-off production line, maybe from Mexico or Venezuela. The latter had been trying to run weapons into the US for years now, seemingly convinced that we were permanently on the verge of race war and if they supplied the Hispanics with weapons, they would rise up against the evil Anglos. It was working about as well as you might expect when the Final War began and they got nuked in passing. “You should have let me go.”

“I get to have all the fun,” I said, grinning. I felt almost alive again. “It's in my contract.”

I looked over towards the defenders. “They've got hostages in those vehicles, so don't shoot them unless there's no choice,” I ordered, wincing. I expected the gangs to start using them as human shields any time now. That would present us with a serious problem, although I was sure that Stacy and Patty could avoid shooting any innocent victims. They scared even me. “Mac, get the second reserves up into position. I think we're going to need them.”

The gang probably thought that they were trapped. They might have had a point. If they gave me enough time, I would assault their position myself, with sniper cover and even mortar fire. It would have been a waste of the latter...but I couldn't even think that. If I lost one of my veterans, the cost would be proportionally worse. I couldn't afford to lose any of them.

“We're going to have to press the kids harder,” I said, grimly. A charge at them would be costly, even with the body armour, unless they surrendered at once. God alone knew what other weapons they were packing. What if they'd looted a National Guard armoury, or a police station, or even a gun store? “We can't risk this happening again.”

“They're kids,” Mac said. “They need more time to get ready.”

“We weren't much older,” I protested, quietly. “You and I joined up at eighteen.”

“And we volunteered,” Mac reminded me. “They're still thinking about girls, and maybe getting away from the country for a while, not about risking their lives in defence...”

He broke off as a whistle blew.

“They’re coming,” Brent shouted.

“Good,” I said, raising my voice. “Stand by to repel attack!”

Chapter Twelve

The invention of gunpowder and the constant improvement of firearms are enough in themselves to show that the advance of civilization has done nothing practical to alter or deflect the impulse to destroy the enemy, which is central to the very idea of war.

-Carl von Clausewitz

The gang-bangers yelled as they started to advance towards us, making use of what cover they could find. I wondered if it was meant to be intimidating, but I tended to find it more amusing than anything else. They showed a rudimentary grasp of military tactics, but only rudimentary. If I had found myself charged with taking Ingalls, particularly after I'd set up the defences, I would have probed around for a weak spot, not charged the strongest defence line I could find. Their backstops, a handful of men with better weapons, fired on us from their positions, trying to force us to keep our heads down and prevent us from firing back.

"I brought up the reinforcements," Jackson King said. He looked grim, but determined to do his duty. He hadn't exactly had an easy time in the last couple of days. Ingalls wasn't a racist town, not really, but not everyone resident in the town had been happy at the thought of a black Deputy. Some of them had even been rude enough to say that they stayed in the country to keep away from black men. "Where do you want them?"

"Keep them in reserve," I ordered, calmly. For once, I was back in my element, flashing back to Iraq. "Let's see how this develops."

I studied the advancing gang-bangers as carefully as I could. I had wondered at their decision to advance, but now I saw them clearly, I suspected that I understood why. They looked hungry and tired, as if they were pushing themselves onwards by sheer force of will, rather than determination. I'd seen their hostage and their leader – at least, I assumed that he'd been the leader – and both of them had been hungry. What had happened to them between the bombs going off and their arrival here?

"We need some prisoners," I muttered to Mac, who nodded. Making them talk wouldn't be difficult. Judging by their condition, they would probably have talked in exchange for a good feed. "Patty, Stacy, on my command, take down their snipers."

"Yes, sir," Patty called, from her hide. She was almost completely impossible to spot from the outside. Even though they knew the snipers were there, the gang obviously hadn't bothered to try to suppress them. "Ready and waiting, sir!"

"Good," I said. "Fire!"

The two girls fired as one. The shots that had been coming towards us suddenly slacked off sharply as the snipers found their targets. I was sure that they had hit them as well – the girls were excellent shots – but as long as they weren't firing, I didn't care. It might even work out in our favour if one of them had survived. They would probably be senior members if they were allowed to carry heavy weapons like those.

(And yes, they were heavy by gang standards. Very few of the stereotypes about gang-bangers and their arsenals of weapons are actually true. I'd be surprised if they were

anything like as well armed as we were, although it was possible that they could have looted additional weapons from somewhere along their travels.)

I smiled. “Mac, blow the mines!”

The explosion shook the barricades. Mac had wanted to set up Claymores, but as we had only a limited supply of them, I had convinced him to use mining explosives instead. We’d been going through abandoned houses and property – their owners had been well away from Ingalls when the balloon went up and wouldn’t be coming back – and some mining firm had simply abandoned the explosives. It would have been a major scandal before the War, but now...now, I was just glad to have them. The explosion sent the gang-bangers back in shock, those that survived. Mac’s Ranger background had served him well and he’d organised all kinds of nasty tricks for intruders.

“Not bad,” I said. Mac gave me a wry grin. “Shooters, mark your positions and open fire.”

The gang members were stumbling back in shock when the guards opened fire, conserving their ammunition, as I had ordered. We couldn’t afford to run ourselves dry of ammunition, not when we might face other such battles in the future. I was ruefully aware that this particular gang might not be the only one out there – in fact, I was *certain* that they weren’t the only one out there. They might not be *that* dangerous – although I didn’t even have an accurate count of how many there were of them – but others might well be worse. My real nightmare was running into a rogue National Guard unit. It might happen...

“They’re on the run,” Mac said, calmly. The gang-bangers had started to run the second we opened fire, but only a handful made it to the relative safety of the vehicles. I half-hoped that they would try to surrender, but instead they fell back slightly, firing a handful of shots towards us to discourage pursuit. I wasn’t inclined to give chase, not yet. I had other concerns. So far, we had survived without any casualties and I wanted to keep it that way. “Want to bet they try to run?”

I shrugged. The reserves had brought up the mortar. The 81mm weapon would drop a shell on them if they tried to run, but somehow I suspected that they would make another try, somehow. If they were as hungry as I thought, they would have little choice, unless they decided to resort to cannibalism. It would probably wipe them out, in the end – human flesh is just riddled with diseases – but by the time it killed them, they would probably have eaten their way through their hostages. I looked down at the school bus and winced. I hoped that they hadn’t taken a bunch of children hostage. That would really be all that I needed.

“Check weapons and ammunition,” I ordered, during the lull. I wanted to make sure that we had enough ammunition on hand. The National Guard, at least, had fired its weapons regularly, but I couldn’t have Isaac Chang and his men on the walls. I needed them too much as well. Luckily, most of the veterans knew what they were doing with them.

“We could assault them,” Mac offered, watching the gang-bangers like a hawk. He liked them even less than I did, which I wouldn’t have believed possible. “Ten gets you twenty they’d surrender the minute they saw us charging.”

I considered it – again. I had expected their second attack by now, but perhaps they were just getting organised. We could assault their position, and I was sure that we would win, but we

would be devastatingly vulnerable while we clambered over the barricades as a group. Mac, or a bunch of his cronies, could probably...

I smiled. I'd had an idea. "Mac, take Jackson and his unit," I ordered, quickly. "Get them out of CP3 and around to take them from the rear. Take two of the machine guns and one of the AT weapons with you, just in case, but be in position to trap them against the barricades."

"Yes, sir," Mac said, saluting with surprising enthusiasm. I'd half-expected a sardonic remark about how I was sending him off to commit suicide. Soldiers can be morbid sometimes, particularly ones who think they've pushed their luck too far. I think he was a little bored, as was I. There was too much to do in Ingalls, but most of it was boring. "Jackson, come on."

I saw Jackson's wince – he hadn't really been in a real fight, unless one counted brief moments of violence – but he followed gamely, along with his section. They had twenty-one men, seven of them veterans, and all of them slightly more expendable than some of the others on the walls. I hated to risk any of them, but Mac wouldn't let them endanger themselves and Jackson was smart enough to defer to his judgement. I wished it didn't feel so much like risking my people on the character of an untested junior officer – something that happened too often in the regular Army – but there was little choice.

A roar brought me back to reality. The gang-bangers had finally decided what to do. A truck, large enough to carry several heavy containers, was being moved around so that its rear pointed directly towards the barricade. It was packed with boxes of all shapes and sizes, including several that looked as if they would fall out at any moment, and I had to bite back a laugh when I realised what they were. The gang-bangers had been looting, all right, but they hadn't been looting food. They'd been looting museums and jewellery stores! They'd probably been robbing banks as well.

I heard suppressed chuckles running up and down the line as my men made the same realisation. No *wonder* the gang-bangers all qualified for the Darwin awards. I wasn't sure of what was going on beyond my horizons, which had shrunk badly to Ingalls, the Stonewall prison and a few miles beyond, but I was sure that money was equally useless. A person's weight in gold – unless you're Neddy Seagoon – isn't actually that much, and at the moment, most rational people would have preferred their weight in food instead. Greenbacks would be more useful as toilet paper than hard currency.

But the gang-bangers weren't all stupid, I realised, as the truck revved its engine and moved towards us, tail first. If the barricade had *only* been what was visible, hitting it with a moving vehicle might have pushed it out the way, allowing them to charge through the breach. As it was, it was about to get hairy. I cursed under my breath. The vehicle would run over the second set of mines and everything would go up into the air.

"Patty, take out that thing's wheels," I ordered. An AT round would have stopped it dead in its tracks, but I didn't want to waste one. If we had a clear shot at the driver, we would have taken it, but we didn't have a shot. The gang-banger was clearly not as suicidal as some of the insurgents we'd encountered. I barely heard her shots over the noise of the engine, but as the tyres deflated, the truck just kept on coming. It had been designed for rougher treatment than that. Maybe we were going to have to take it out...

My hesitation nearly proved fatal. I will admit that. Before I could order the AT team to engage it, the truck ran over the second set of mines and exploded in an almighty fireball. The strange colours within the flames suggested, in hindsight, that rare paintings had been included among the gang-bangers' loot, but at the time we didn't time to worry. The explosion lashed at the barricade and sent parts of it teetering over, on fire.

"Get the reserves up now," I snapped, as I drew my pistol. I shouldn't have been anywhere near now that we had a breach, or the beginnings of one, but I wasn't going to run. "Get that hole sealed, now!"

The gang-bangers yelled and advanced again, running towards the breach as quickly as they could move. The landscape had been partly redesigned to make that difficult, but we hadn't had the time to make a real impact, not yet. I'd been intending to use the prisoners to make additional defences, but I hadn't wanted them to get a look at the interior defences. Paranoia, when Law and Order had broken down so completely, was definitely a survival tool. They looked more determined now, more intent on victory...and, seeing the breach in the barricades, lunged forward, suddenly confident of victory. They were a gang, after all, feared by ordinary citizens and protected by an establishment more intent on looking good than tackling the root causes of inner-city decay. What did they have to fear from us now that the barricade had tumbled?

They'd learned, as well. This time, they were firing quick bursts towards the two snipers – or, at least, towards their rough location. Patty and Stacy duelled with them, taking shots at the gunmen when they had a chance, but they couldn't suppress them in time. The mines had been used in the first attack, they thought, but when they reached the break, they realised that we were hardly broken. We greeted them with a hail of fire.

It's not easy to aim a handgun precisely, no matter what the movies say, but I'm sure I hit at least two of them personally. I carried the Desert Eagle for its stopping power, not for the macho man image that came with it, and I'm sure that if I hit one of the gang-bangers, I killed him. I felt no remorse at the time, or later. Ingalls was my home now and they wanted to loot, rape and burn their way through my town. I wasn't going to let that happen.

The gang-bangers wavered and broke under our fire, falling back in disarray towards their vehicles. This time, everything was different; Mac and his merry men were assaulting from the other side, slipping up under cover of our fire and attacking the remaining gang-bangers from the rear. They panicked, caught between two fires, and attempted to fight back, but we had the advantage now and we used it mercilessly. A handful of gang-bangers attempted to run and we shot them in the back, while several more tried to surrender, throwing their weapons down and begging for mercy. We weren't gentle. Those that offered to surrender were knocked to the ground and brutally cuffed. They just looked happy to be alive.

I took a second section down to the vehicles and we started to search them, one by one. We lost a pair of men then as a gang-banger, hidden in one of the trucks, screamed something incoherent at them and fired a Uzi into their faces. Mac killed him a second later, but they were well beyond even Doctor Nelson's skill to save. Another gang-banger, trying to escape, started to try to move the school bus, only to have it riddled with bullets when he started the engine. He flopped down into the seat and lay still.

Brent led the team into the bus personally, but found almost nothing, beyond a handful of weapons and suddenly-worthless examples of the gang-bangers' greed. I followed, relieved to discover that there were no kids in the bus, when I realised that I hadn't seen the hostage at all. The final vehicle, parked at the rear, hadn't been searched and so Brent led the way over there. I wanted to lead the team personally, but Mac held me back firmly.

"You really shouldn't be risking your life," he said, seriously. The old me would have considered that an insult, what Texas used to call fighting words. The new me realised his point, even as I chaffed against the restrictions high rank brought in its wake. "Seriously, Ed, let Brent take point."

Brent opened the rear hatch and was promptly smashed in the face by a bare foot, sending him staggering backwards onto the ground. A black figure – for a moment, I thought that it was wearing a camouflage uniform for night operations – had kicked him and was desperately trying to kick another man in the groin. He raised his weapon, ready to fire, but I called him back. The girl – it had been hard to tell earlier, because she had been moving so fast – was not only naked, but her hands were firmly cuffed behind her back. Like the others in the group, she looked half-starved and her eyes were those of a desperate animal. I somehow doubted that she was a gang-banger.

"It's all right," I said, even though it wasn't. Brent would probably need surgery for his nose, but luckily it wasn't serious. If that kick had been a couple of inches lower she might well have crushed his throat. "We're friends. You're all right now. Really."

We helped her out of the truck and removed her handcuffs, before looking further into the van. The man I'd spoken to earlier was there, but he didn't call out to me...and it only took me a moment to realise why. Someone had drawn a knife across his throat, and that of a fat woman who'd been cuffed beside him. His wife, I realised, feeling sick. I'd seen worse, but this was something awful. The two girls – they were just barely entering their teens – were staring at their parents bodies, while a third girl, a teenager with a vapid blank expression on her face, showed no reaction at all. She didn't even look at us. Like the first girl, she was naked.

"Shit," Mac said, as we realised what the children had just seen. They'd seen their own parents killed in front of them. I hoped – prayed – that the gang-bangers hadn't seen fit to rape them, but even if they had spared them that, they had still traumatized them for life. "Damn it, Ed, we can't let that go."

"We're not going to," I said, and climbed down to the first girl. I'd dealt with rape victims before and them still fighting, however it was expressed, was a good sign. "Listen," I said. "My name is Ed. Can you talk now?"

She started to talk, slowly, but calmly...

And when she had finished her tale, I had to physically restrain Jackson from walking over to the gang-bangers we'd taken prisoner and blowing their brains out. I had thought I'd known how bad it would become, but I hadn't even been close.

The cities were falling into a nightmare of madness and death.

Chapter Thirteen

We do not discount the seriousness of rape as a crime. It is highly reprehensible, both in a moral sense and in its almost total contempt for the personal integrity and autonomy of the female victim and for the latter's privilege of choosing those with whom intimate relationships are to be established. Short of homicide, it is the "ultimate violation of self."

-Supreme Court of the United States, Coker v. Georgia

Her name was Roshanda and she had been a cop.

We listened to her story in growing disbelief and horror. She'd pulled herself out of the ghetto through luck, smarts and a parent who had refused to allow her to sink into prostitution and drug abuse, like so many other girls from her background. She'd aced school and managed to get herself into one of the better High Schools, before going on to join the police force as a young trainee. She'd graduated and had had two years service under her belt when the war came and her police station was knocked down by the blast.

She'd pulled herself – and two male policemen – out of the wreckage when the gang-bangers arrived, keen to salvage what they could from the ruins of the police station. I wondered, judging by her confused state of mind, if the police station had actually been *attacked*, rather than just been too close to a nuclear detonation, but there was no way to know. The gang-bangers had fallen on the three cops and beaten the two men to death...and they had been the lucky ones. Roshanda had been beaten, cuffed with her own cuffs, and then raped repeatedly. She'd expected to die any second, but she'd never stopped fighting, even though it was hopeless. The gang-bangers had found it funny.

They'd taken her with them as the struggle for survival broke out. At first, several gangs allied together to take what they could, before law and order was restored. They'd go out and hit banks, or stores, before coming back and celebrating their victory with Roshanda and a handful of other girl prisoners. The next few days had taught them the folly of taking valuables that were no longer valuable after the War and they'd turned to taking food, only to discover that most of the food supplies were drying out. A gang – or maybe a volunteer association – had taken control of most of the food supplies remaining in the city and the gang-bangers hadn't been welcome. Some of them had fallen to cannibalism, eating the dead bodies from the streets, only to become gravely ill. The remainder had fled.

And they'd taken Roshanda with them. She had tried to fight, every time, but hunger and misery had ground her down. She'd been almost pathetically grateful for what scraps of food they'd served her, when they'd had food to spare, but she'd been in terrible pain. They'd known better than to let her free, even beaten and badly abused, and her body had suffered. The bouts of blankness had been growing longer and longer and she'd feared that one day soon she'd just lose it completely, like the Zombie Girl. It had become almost a desired state for her.

The gang had commandeered a few vehicles and headed out of the city towards the farms. They'd run into trouble already with a biker gang that had had the same idea and exchanged shots with them before coming to an arrangement, trading a pair of girls from the convoy for food and directions. The bikers had cheated them, although no one was sure if they'd done it on purpose, because they'd found themselves redirected towards a town that had barricaded itself up, like Ingalls had. They'd been driven away from the town in disarray and their only

relief had come from locating a store of foodstuffs in an abandoned truck. They'd pressed on, terrified of fallout and suspected that it had been what had killed their fellows, and finally reached Ingalls.

As I had summarised, they'd been weak and on the verge of collapse. They'd snatched up their representative and his family partly because they could – and to have a little fun with his wife, if not his two daughters – and partly as a food source. The leader – the bastard the two snipers had killed – had kept them together, somehow, but they'd known that they were on the verge of collapse. Once hunger caught up with them, they would be dead. They'd had no time to do anything, but launch a frontal attack on Ingalls and hope.

I looked over at Rose as Roshanda finished speaking. "Rose, take her and the other prisoners to Kit and tell him to treat them as soon as possible," I ordered. Rose had given Roshanda her jacket, which the former cop now clung to like a baby's blanket. "Try and keep them separate from any of the men for the moment."

"Yes, sir," Rose said. She paused. "Can I suggest bringing in one of the nurses from Stonewall? Any of them would have more experience with rape trauma and they'd have the advantage of being women."

I doubted the first point – Doctor Kit Nelson had a history that made mine look ordinary – but acknowledged the second. "See to it," I added, and watched as the women were escorted back towards Ingalls. Kit would see them just past the barricades. The Zombie girl – the first Zombies we had seen – looked completely out of it, as if she'd been blown right out of her mind. I had never seen a state of walking catatonia before, but I was sure I was looking at it now. "Jackson, the prisoners..."

They sat on the ground, shaking, all nine of them. The defiance and vicious determination that they'd hoped would make up for lack of training or planning had vanished, replaced by fear and a certain knowledge that none of us had any reason to show them mercy. Jackson had taken the step of piling up the dead bodies in their view, just as a reminder that we were prepared to kill them if they failed to convince us otherwise, while seven men kept their weapons firmly pointed right at them. If they had started anything, it would have ended really quickly.

Two of them, I noticed with some surprise, were women. They might have been pretty once, like Roshanda had been, but hard wearing had been unkind to them. I wondered briefly if they'd been innocent victims, but we'd seen them shooting at us, freely taking part in an act of aggression. I wasn't inclined to be merciful to any of them, but if any of them were spared, it would be the women. I allowed my gaze to drift across the men and smiled coldly. Like the prisoners from Stonewall, they would be easy to break.

Of the seven men, four were black, almost traditional gang-bangers. Two were Chinese, from their appearance, and a third was white, making it a surprisingly racially-integrated gang. I amused myself with a wry thought. The PC thugs who had insisted on racially-diverse communities would have horrified to discover what had happened in their name, or perhaps they would have viewed it as vindication. Crime, after all, is colour-blind.

I stared at them coldly until they were all looking back at me. "Which one of your fucks is in charge?" I demanded. "Who's the leader here?"

They said nothing, until one of the Chinese thugs nodded towards one of the dead bodies. "You killed him," he said, in a voice flavoured with Mainland China. I guessed his story easily enough. He, or his parents, had been an illegal immigrant from China. Despite the Chinese Government's long-standing complaints about us, the Chinese still thought that America was a good place to live. The Final War had proved them wrong. "I'm sorry and..."

I caught him and pulled him upright. Cuffed, he could offer no resistance. "You're sorry?" I demanded, angrily. "You're sorry? You come here, you attack my people, intent on stealing our food and supplies, and you're sorry? Some of my people are dead because of you! Are you sorry about that too?"

Up close, he smelt bad, like a boy who had remained unwashed for weeks. It wouldn't surprise me if that were indeed the case. Ingalls had a fairly modern sewage system, but maintaining it without parts from outside was pure hell. Ray Thompson had warned that if we didn't modify the system soon enough, we might have real problems keeping it running past the next year. It was bad enough dealing with the local water, which had to be filtered carefully because of all the past mining, but the sewers were a real point failure source.

"You're sorry," I repeated. "Can you bring the dead back to life?"

I threw him to the ground and glared down at them all. "You're going to be fucking sorry all right," I snapped. It was easy to sound intimidating. It would have been easy to just draw my pistol and blow their heads off and they had to know it. They knew, also, that I wanted to kill them. "You're going to be working for us now, got that?"

We're going to need labour, I reminded myself, as they seemed to shrink inwards. They'd never been treated like that in their lives. They had always been the big men on the streets, the ones the law couldn't touch, defended by an army of lawyers and civil liberties advocates if there was just a single touch more violence used than absolutely necessary...and the uncrowned kings of their world. It was a delusion, but none the less real for all that; the men who'd brought them into that world had died, and their courage had died with them. They knew I'd killed them.

And it was hard to banish the image of the naked and desperate girl from my eyes.

"The rules have changed," I snarled. I drew my pistol and held it to one of their heads. "I can shoot each and every one of you and no one will fucking stop me, got that? I can do as I fucking please with all of you, understand?" There was a pause. "Do you understand?"

"Yes," one of the black men said. He looked beaten, at least, but I knew better than to trust any of them. Gang-bangers can't be trusted outside their gangs. "I..."

"That's 'sir' to you," I said, sharply. He cringed. "Now, listen good. This is the only choice you get. You will work for us for five years, doing exactly what we tell you to do, and you'll get a pardon at the end of it. Fuck with us during that time and you'll be doing one final dance at the end of a rope. If you refuse that, we'll strip you naked and shove you out in the wildness to die, understand?"

I stared down at them. “How many people want to work for us?”

In the end, they all agreed. Somehow, I wasn't surprised.

“All right,” I said, nodding at Jackson. “There are two facts you need to know about this man. One is that he was an interrogator at Guantanamo Bay. The second is that it was his sister you were having your fun with.” They paled, blanching. Both statements, as it happened, were outright lies. The closest that Jackson had been to Cuba had been Florida, while his sister lived somewhere near Chicago. “You will go with him and answer his questions. Lie to us once and you will be beaten half to death. Lie to us twice and you will be killed.”

I watched as Jackson and the Posse dragged them away. Jackson might not have been a CIA interrogator, but he did have experience interrogating suspects. He'd keep them separate, ask them the same questions and compare answers. If they didn't match, the discrepancy would be probed until the truth was revealed. I doubted, given their condition, that there would be many discrepancies. They certainly hadn't had time to agree on a lie beforehand.

“We lost four people, with five more injured,” Mac said, as I walked away from the scene. The remains of the truck had scattered parts of the barricade, but fortunately it hadn't been too large a breach to fill. “Kit says that he can probably save the injured men, but that if there are more injuries...”

I nodded. “We'd run out of supplies,” I said, grimly. It was something else we would have to start making for ourselves or scavenging from the ruins. Jackson's interrogation session might tell us more about what was happening outside our walls. “I'm heading over there now.”

Mac nodded. “Of course,” he said. “AAR this evening?”

“Yep,” I said. I had hated paperwork when I'd been a Marine, but After Action Reports were very important. It would allow us to examine what had happened, what had gone wrong, what had gone right...and why. “Keep them working, Mac. Don't give them time to brood.”

“Teach your grandma to suck eggs,” Mac said, rudely.

I found Doctor Kit Nelson in the temporary ward he'd established next to the decontamination centre. Kit was middle-aged, older than me by about five years, but looked younger. He was the most flamboyant homosexual I had ever encountered, starting a career in the military as a medical corpsman, followed by a stint in several trouble spots across the globe, and finally as an EMT before he had retired to Ingalls. He had been a very good medical corpsman and his disgrace and expulsion had been...well, a disgrace. He had neither been asked, nor had he told, but he had been forced out. There were times when I could happily strangle uniformed politicians.

And his sexuality didn't make him a bad doctor.

“This is a preliminary diagnosis,” he said, once we had discussed the injured from the battle. They would recover fairly quickly, thank God. We didn't have the facilities for serious injuries that I had enjoyed in Iraq. “I have not had time for an intrusive examination, if I can

convince her to allow me to make one, but I believe that she will make a full recovery, physically.”

He paused. “It was hard enough to give her a basic examination,” he added. “A raped woman, regardless of how much or how little she fought, feels violated on a very primal level. I can tell you, for example, that she is going to have nasty scars for the remainder of her life, but I don’t know just how badly she is hurt internally. I think that she will make a physical recovery, but I don’t know if she will be able to have children, or even if she will be able to have sex again. The damage might be quite severe.”

I winced. “I see,” I said, angrily. I – I and the rest of the rough men standing guard – had been meant to protect people like Roshanda. I felt almost as if I had failed her, even though I had barely known her for more than a few hours. It wasn’t based on logic and reason. “And mentally?”

“That’s more debatable,” Kit said. He scowled in disgust. “The issue behind rape is that it is primarily a loss of control; control over one of the most important functions of a woman’s body, that of having sex. Roshanda did not choose to open her legs for the rapists and that loss of control is tearing away at her, assuming that she’s a typical victim. The vast majority of rape victims go through long periods of depression and paranoia, although a handful tend to go the other way and try to have as many men as possible. You’ll note that it wasn’t a bad date that went wrong, or even a one-night stand, both incidents where she had some control, but a violent assault that deprived her of all control. She knows that she lost that control over her own body.

“Did I tell you that I spent time in Afghanistan?” He asked. I nodded. “I spent some weeks helping in a woman’s support clinic there for refugee women. Most of them suffered from some kind of mental disorder because they had never had any kind of control over their bodies at all. They were kept in seclusion, kept firmly under control, sold to their husbands and forced to copulate with them whenever he wanted to have sex. They resented their treatment at a very primal level, but were unable to break free. They even discovered that if they were raped – if their father’s control or their husband’s control was stolen by another man – they were held responsible for it and killed. They were blamed for something they *knew* wasn’t their fault.

“And that, Ed, is why there are so many flame wars over abortion. It’s all about control. Control over women and their bodies.”

He grimaced and continued. “Our society, thank God, is just a little more civilised,” he said. “We’re not going to blame her for getting raped. She came out fighting and is still fighting, so I believe that she will make a full recovery. The other girl, however...

“I have tried several things to snap her out of her own mind, but nothing seems to work,” he said. “I think that she was shocked so badly by the war and the sudden changes in her life that she just zoned out completely. It’s not uncommon to see that in disaster relief situations, where a person’s mind cannot cope, but this is an extreme case. Roshanda says that the gang-bangers used to force-feed her. We might have to do the same. Practically, I don’t know what else we can do with her.”

“Yes,” I said. I pushed that issue out of my mind and cast my thoughts back to the battle.
“There’s nothing more costly than a battle lost, Doctor, apart from a battle won. This won’t be the last battle in the next few months.”

Chapter Fourteen

Let every nation know, whether it wishes us well or ill, we shall pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe, to assure the survival and success of liberty.

-John F. Kennedy

The next few weeks passed in a blur.

We held the funerals for the four dead men the day after the battle, when we all gathered together for a brief service and a heartfelt sigh of relief. The four men had left a hole in our ranks – three of them had been veterans who shouldn't have been out on the barricades at all – but we couldn't despair. We had no choice, but to continue the struggle for survival. I sat next to Rose as the Reverend Thomas McNab eulogised the dead and found myself wishing, again, that it had been me who had died in their place. They had had so much more to life for than I had.

Jackson's interrogations hadn't turned up much more than we'd already learned from Roshanda, although the gang-bangers had been too scared to lie. They'd come out of Charleston, not entirely to my surprise, although I had never thought of it as a big gang town. It would have been a target for Russian attack, however, and had probably absorbed at least a couple of nukes. I wasn't too surprised to hear that law and order had broken down so quickly, although the gang-bangers had warned that someone had been busy organising the gangs into a united force. I wasn't sure if I believed them or not. The smarter gangs would have left the cities at once before they became untenable...and this bunch hadn't been the brightest cookies in the bunch.

"It's much more likely that they just decided to keep going because they were afraid of radioactive poisoning," Mac said, afterwards, although a brief examination had revealed nothing beyond minor traces of fallout on their clothes. It wouldn't be anything pleasant, but they'd probably survive for years without developing cancer. The ones who'd gotten ill, I guessed, had merely eaten bad meat. Human flesh, as I believe I noted earlier, is not a healthy source of food. "Do you still want to keep them?"

"It's that or hang them," I said. I wasn't going to let them loose again, even stark naked as I had threatened, and I wasn't going to waste my ammunition shooting them all. The girls, it turned out, had been the mistresses of two of the senior gang-bangers and had known everything their men had done. I wasn't feeling sympathetic towards them, although I had a nasty feeling that perhaps I should be considering using them as mothers rather than brute labour. I'd forced that feeling down – I wasn't going to do that, not under any circumstances – but it kept lingering at the back of my mind. "What else can we do with them?"

The day afterwards, the prisoners arrived from Stonewall. Richard and I had used the time well to go through the prisoner records and pick out a handful with skills that could be useful elsewhere. A pair of doctors and a male nurse – all in jail for theft and abuse of medical supplies – had been transported into Ingalls to work under Kit. I'd made sure that they had been warned of the consequences of doing anything stupid, but I had arranged for them to be kept carefully under observation. Their skills made them valuable...and far from expendable. The remaining prisoners, on the other hand...

I watched as they clinked their way down towards the outer barricades. I had thought about driving them from Stonewall to Ingalls, but that would have cost us gasoline we could hardly afford to waste. We had drained almost every car tank into the main supplies, but we didn't have enough for everything we might need vehicles to do. In the long term – the very long term – we could probably make more, but that was probably a project for next year at the very least. Rebecca, on the other hand, had come up with a scheme for producing methane from human wastes and now most of our food was cooked on methane. I hadn't even considered that possibility, but she'd assured me that it was used in Africa as an aid project, improving the continent one step at a time. It made me wonder how Africa was faring, cut off from all international aid, but I didn't want to know. There were some places in Africa that were probably faring better than we were.

"All present and correct, *sir*," Richard said, as the final prisoner arrived. He'd had their legs chained together, just to make escape impossible, although they had seen enough of the countryside to know that escape would lead to certain death even if they weren't shot – quite literally – trying to escape. "Orders, *sir*?"

I stepped forward and started to issue orders. The prisoners might be only good for brute labour, at the moment, but half of them could work now on improving our defences. They started to dig ditches and build up the ramparts after I had finished issuing orders to that particular group, while a second group worked to clear away the wreckage from the gang-banger attack. We'd skimmed through the vehicles quickly, just after the end of the battle, but I was surprised by some of the shit they found. I'd been watching carefully for weapons, but they found cigarettes – which I sent back to be shared out among the addicts, those who weren't trying to kick the habits – and a small supply of drugs. I confiscated the latter, but Kit convinced me to keep it around as an anaesthetic if more normal drugs ran out.

The third group of prisoners was ordered to start moving out garbage to the landfill two kilometres away. The landfill had been one of Washington's ideas in hopes of cleaning up the landscape a bit, or more likely pleasing some of their contributors – ok, I'm a cynical bastard, but I'd be more depressed if I thought they really had no reason for doing what they did – but it hadn't been so useful after the Final War. Folks used to drive their cars and vans out to dump their shit – some of which might actually be useful now – but now, with so little gasoline left, there was zero enthusiasm for the task. The best solution I'd come up with was to have the prisoners take out the garbage, after first sorting through it to ensure that nothing useful was being thrown out.

I left matters in Richard's capable hands and walked back through Ingalls towards the High School, which had now been fortified in a manner that would have given a Marine Company pause...although honesty compels me to admit that that pause would have been because they were sniggering their heads off. We'd fortified the School as well as we could, but there was a shortage of real protection for the kids, even now. It was something that was going to be a major problem in the future if the barricades actually fell and we were forced to fight house-to-house. It was something that worried me greatly.

"And so you always remember to keep the units of measurement straight..."

Ray Thompson was in the classroom, lecturing a bunch of teenage girls who were watching him with scarily intent expressions. I blamed Rose for that. She'd convinced me that girls – and young women – should handle almost anything that didn't involve fighting, and that

included civil engineering. This was actually Ray's break, but he was spending it teaching the young women enough engineering to get by in Ingalls. It did help that we weren't going to be considering skyscrapers any time soon, or massive dams to create reservoirs of water, but it was still a weakness. The girls would be doing most of their learning on the job.

(And Rose had told them that if they didn't develop a tradition of women working in the rear areas, they'd end up being treated like women in Afghanistan, forced to remain second-class citizens rather than fully equal to the men. That would happen, as far as I was concerned, over my dead body, but Rose had made it sound like a certainty. They wouldn't be barefoot and pregnant in the kitchen, but clothed and working as anything, but soldiers. She'd even started a whole series of competitions with the men.)

I walked down to the next few classrooms and saw Emily and Jane, two of the nurses from Stonewall, lecturing other girls – and a handful of boys – on emergency medical techniques. They'd probably bent about a million rules about practicing medicine without a licence, rules the AMA had instigated for some reason that had probably made sense at the time, but I no longer cared. If they could save lives, and teach other girls how to save lives, then it was fine in my book. Besides, we were going to need to spread the knowledge out as far as possible. The more doctors and nurses we had, the better our chances for survival in the coming few years.

The final classroom was a tactics class, taught by a pair of veterans who had served in the Gulf War and innumerable small unit engagements since then, for the boys who had showed promise in the conscripted classes. They'd showed a remarkable increase in determination lately, as I had expected, after they'd seen the gang-bangers and their victims. What had happened to poor Roshanda might happen to their sisters, girlfriends and even mothers. I couldn't have asked for a better lesson in the need for a strong defence if I had planned it myself.

I listened for a long moment, before continuing down towards the headmaster's office. Walter Loy – Mayor Walter Loy, now – had refused to move permanently into the Town Hall, although he did half his work there. I hadn't wanted to keep him from his *real* job, or what he saw as his real job, although his election probably meant that he should have devoted all of his attention to the job of leading the community. Besides, I hadn't wanted anyone else involved in the decision to kill two-thirds of Stonewall's population and I didn't want to place him in a similar position. The blood could remain on my hands and not his. He was a decent man and deserved better.

He looked up as I entered from where he was marking papers. "You'll be pleased to hear," he said, by way of introduction, "that there have been more applicants for the various training courses than we could accept."

I nodded briskly. Rose and Roy, between them, had inspired students in ways that they hadn't been inspired before the War. It helped that we still saw spectacular sunsets and were, to all intents and purposes, cut off from whatever was left of the world. We might not be producing lawyers, or bankers, or other grasshoppers, but we'd be producing people who were actually useful. All of those professions were useful, in their way, but only when society supported their presence. At the moment, they were only good for brute labour.

"Good," I said, finally. "How are you finding the two jobs?"

“Tiring,” Walter said. He gave me a wan smile that didn’t fool me for a second. He was pushing himself to the brink of collapse. I wondered if I should insist on him becoming Mayor permanently, but that would probably spark off a constitutional crisis, or something like that. Our exact legal status was something that we would have to give some thought to, later. “Do you know that we’ve been making explosives from our own...ah, shit?”

I knew, of course. There were all kinds of interesting things you could do with human waste, including making gunpowder – eventually – and fertiliser. I knew several ways to make additional explosives with common items we had in great supply, but all of them would have cost us items we needed. I was finding the complete absence of any supplies from outside to be a major nuisance. If I had stocked up weeks before the war...

“Yes, Walter,” I said. He had refused to be addressed as ‘Sir.’ I didn’t know why, although I had a few guesses. We all needed someone we could relax with. “Have you given any thought to my proposal?”

“I don’t know, Ed,” he said. He frowned, scowling up at what had once been an accurate map of West Virginia. God alone knew what the demographic landscape looked like now. Cold logic told me that we couldn’t be the last town in the world, or even in the state, but it was hard to overcome the oppression of the horizon. “Are you sure that it would be safe?”

“Nothing in life is safe,” I reminded him. “I think that the sooner we find out what’s out there, the better.”

“True, true” Walter said. “Give it a few weeks before you go, all right?”

I nodded and slipped out of his office. We were working the entire town to death, myself included, and we were on the brink of collapse. If my calculations were accurate, if we lived through the coming year, we had a good chance at permanent survival. I spent the rest of the day supervising the prisoners, inspecting the rebuilt defences, and finally joining Rose and Deborah as they went through another batch of electronic equipment. The damned EMP hadn’t fried everything, but we had to check it all carefully, just in case.

The thought made me smile bitterly. Some civilian cars had been immobilised by the EMP, which had fried their computer chips. They’d accepted the improved services that the manufacturers promised – and largely delivered – but they hadn’t expected the EMP. Even if they had been aware of the possibility, they’d deluded themselves that it wouldn’t happen. A competent mechanic could have bypassed the chips, but so few city-dwellers had those skills these days. A good mechanic in Ingalls would be worth his weight in gold. So much had changed...

I left them and stumbled upstairs to my office. I hadn’t been in the office for weeks, but it felt like years. There was the plain unadorned desk, the map of Ingalls and the surrounding area, the list of emergency numbers, a useless laptop – damn EMP – and the bottle of whiskey I had stuck in the bottom drawer. It had been a present from Uncle Billy, back when I first took over the job, and I had been drinking from it very slowly. I poured myself a small glass and swallowed it in a gulp, faces rising up in front of my mind’s eye...

My mother, my father, my friends, my relatives, Uncle Billy, the men of my former Company...where were they now? I would have bet on Dad and Uncle Billy against the world – and my mother was the toughest old lady on the block – but they'd been in New York. My family had been in New York. I hadn't allowed myself to think of it before, but now I had a moment's peace I found the barriers crumbling and images slipping out into my mind. I knew – I didn't think, I knew – that New York would have been a Russian target. There were so many worthwhile targets near or in the city. The loss of Wall Street alone would be worthwhile.

(It was probably pointless, under the circumstances, but I knew that Russian planners had had a particular mad-on for Wall Street ever since the Second World War and had included it as a priority target in most of their attack plans, ever since they developed the capability to hit the Continental United States. For some reason, they had kept that targeting priority as they updated their plans, even as their weapons became more sophisticated and flexible.)

And what we'd heard of Charleston...was that a reflection of what had happened in New York? Had my city been torn apart by gang warfare as well, what was left of it after the bombs had detonated. Had Mayor Hundred and his administration been killed, wiped out in the blasts, or had they been lynched as Badgers after the dust had settled? Was my sister stumbling around as a Zombie, or was she still alive, slaving for a gang leader...there was no way to know. How could I know...?

We had lost contact with everyone outside our walls. We might be alone, after all, the last outpost of civilisation. The radio watch had picked up nothing, but static, ever since the bombs had started to detonate. It was impossible, I thought, but had the human race somehow managed to fuck up long-range radio transmissions? Short range radios – those that had survived the EMP – still worked, but reception was shaky at best. Could we be all alone in the world?

Somehow, I found I had poured myself a second glass. I drank it slowly, savouring the taste, knowing that I would never see any more after it had gone. Even if Scotland – and Uncle Billy, the butcher of the IRA – had remained intact, we would not be able to make contact for years. So much had been destroyed in the war. My country was a pitiful wreck, leaving survivors like us to hold the line against the final darkness, and the only consolation I had was that Russia had suffered worse. It was small consolation. I saw the faces of those I had ordered killed, or driven away, just to give the rest of us some chance at life, and shivered again. Had it been worth all those crimes, just to keep Ingalls alive?

I felt moisture on my cheeks and shivered. It would be so easy to break down.

And then Rose came to me, and understood, and the darkness receded back into the corners of my mind.

Ingalls was my home now.

Chapter Fifteen

To travel hopefully is better than to arrive.

-Robert Louis Stevenson

“You know what this looks like?”

I looked over at Mac and rolled my eyes. “No,” I said. “What does it look like?”

“Road Trip,” Mac announced, triumphantly. I am ashamed to admit that I laughed at that. “We have vehicles, we have guns and we have two girls. They may be wearing proper clothes rather than just their underwear, but...”

“Shut up,” I said, not unkindly. He laughed again as I found myself sniggering. All right, it was a stupid joke, but it was funny. We hadn’t laughed much since the War. “We’re on a reconnaissance mission to find out what’s been happening outside our borders, not hunting hot chicks in their underwear.”

“The men will be terribly disappointed,” Mac said, still grinning. “I’ve been telling them that if any of them spot a hot chick, they get to keep her.”

I shook my head and led the way over to the small convoy. We’d assembled five vehicles for the trip; two SUVs, two trucks and a surplus jeep from World War Two that one of the residents had kept for some reason. The mechanics swore by it. They said that it was easier to maintain than any of the more modern vehicles and, of course, it hadn’t been remotely damaged by the EMP. We’d armoured the vehicles as best as we could, using skills that had been developed and honed in Iraq, but we weren’t looking for trouble. I just wanted to be prepared for it if it came.

The team straightened up into some semblance of attention as we approached. We’d haggled over the team’s exact composition before agreeing to take eighteen of the new soldiers – the best of their class – and two of the nurses from Stonewall. I’d been reluctant to risk exposing them to any radiation or diseases that might be lingering around, but they had skills no one else had, or at least no one else that we could spare. In Iraq, we would have been better equipped, but unless we were lucky enough to locate a military base that hadn’t been destroyed or looted, we wouldn’t be able to match that. We’d just have to take extreme care with the women. The team had been outfitted in the best body armour we had and the nurses had been warned to stay firmly in the middle of the convoy. Mac and the mechanics had worked wonders on the vehicles, but I couldn’t help being reminded of the technicals that the Iraqi insurgents had used against us. They’d come to grim and unpleasant ends.

“All right,” I said, once silence fell. I pushed a little drama into my voice, hamming it up for the benefit of the more nervous kids in the group. They hadn’t really been under fire before. “Our mission, should we choose to accept it – and you all volunteered, so it’s a bit late to back out now – is to advance to Clarksburg and find out what’s been happening there. If we’re lucky, we’ll run into other survivors. If we’re not lucky, we’ll carry out a brief search of the area, make notes for later scavenging teams, and then return home to the plaudits of a grateful town. Any questions?”

“Yes,” one of them said. “When do we leave?”

“Now,” I replied. I raised my voice. “Mount up!”

We’d cleared one of the barricades slightly just enough to allow the convoy to slip through. Mac had insisted on driving the lead SUV – he had a qualification in advanced driving – so I took the other seat and studied the map as the remainder of the town waved us goodbye. I would have preferred to have left Mac behind, but he’d insisted on coming this time and I couldn’t say no. Walter and Richard, between them, could handle anything that might happen, even if the town was attacked again. There were enough veterans to fight off a second bunch of gang-bangers and the training of the conscripts was coming along nicely.

I saw Rose standing with Jackson and waved to her. We hadn’t said much about our relationship since the first night, but everyone knew...and everyone was doing it anyway. Three girls had become pregnant since the war and there had been seven marriages, all between men and women who would probably not have married without the War. It had had the effect of focusing the mind a little, although I had a suspicion that some of the weddings had been effectively shotgun marriages. If the boy had gotten the girl pregnant...well, there were no social programs to help her any longer.

“I’m sure you’ll be back to see her again,” Mac said, as we drove off down the road. His girlfriend had been just as unhappy to see us go. “I promised I’d get you back in one piece and I meant it.”

“Thanks,” I said, dryly. “Now, keep your eyes on the road and watch out for traffic.”

“Yes, Dad,” he said.

It quickly became apparent that we should have brought a bulldozer along with us, or maybe a tank. (We didn’t have a tank so the point was moot.) The roads were liberally strewn with cars and other vehicles, all abandoned by their former owners, most of them intact. We paused to check out a convoy of trucks that had broken down, or run out of fuel, but found nothing of any great interest. I’d half-hoped for food, or even weapons, but whatever the driver had been carrying, it was gone. Someone had probably taken it after the truck had been abandoned.

“I think that someone needs to clear this entire mess up,” Mac said, tightly. The sight was affecting us all, but he’d lived in the area for far longer than I had. He could remember when it had been crammed with running cars, or aircraft flying overhead, while I could only think of New York and my family. “Perhaps we should get the prisoners down here and strip the cars bare, once we push them off the road.”

I scowled. The entire scene was almost perfect for an ambush and yes, I felt the sensation of *threat* at the back of my neck. We were moving slowly, picking our way between stranded cars, and anyone could have hit us at any time. We hadn’t seen any signs of human population, although we did see a handful of feral dogs in the distance, but the overriding sense of danger refused to fade. I didn’t want to think about what the dogs might have been eating, but it was impossible to avoid. The dogs had probably been eating human flesh. I just hoped that they hadn’t developed a taste for it. We could have used more dogs.

“No argument,” I said, finally. The eerie silence was only making us all jittery. We couldn’t hear anything, but the noise of our own vehicles, not even birds in the sky. I found my hand clutching the butt of my pistol and forced it to unclench. It was like driving through a nuclear nightmare, one of the ones raised by inaccurate movies and junk science, although it probably hadn’t mattered to anyone who had died in the blasts. The living survivors were probably envying the dead. “We just don’t have the manpower to do everything.”

It was a problem that had been worrying me. I’d spared the prisoners because we were going to need them – and because I had no qualms about expending them if there was no other choice – but there weren’t enough of them to make a real dent in everything we needed to do to start rebuilding the countryside, even if we weren’t alone in the brave new world. I was sure that there were other survivors around somewhere, perhaps in the west even if we were the only survivors in the east, but it was easy to believe that we were alone in the world. It reminded me of some of the dumber westerns we had seen back at the barracks, when they’re all alone under the desert sky, strumming a guitar. Where the hell were we going to get more manpower from?

The thought refused to fade. I’d calculated that the two months since the war would probably have ensured the deaths of most of the refugee population and, indeed, the number who had tried to get into Ingalls had fallen sharply to nothing since the end of the first month. Food stocks were either guarded heavily or had run out, condemning refugees to starve, while disease and deprivation would have taken their toll. The rows and rows of abandoned cars bore mute testimony to that.

“There,” Mac said. I followed his pointing finger and shuddered. The cars there hadn’t been abandoned, not with so many bullet holes in their sides. They’d been shot up by someone. They might have run into the gang-bangers we’d killed, or they might have run into someone else, who had refused several expensive cars to rusting piles of cheap metal. “Do you want to take a look?”

I nodded as he pulled the vehicle to a halt. I wanted to go first, but Mac insisted on two of the younger men going first, leaving me to follow in their wake. It bothered me – I had never thought of myself as a General, or someone too important to risk – and there were times when I wondered if some of them saw me as a coward. The lead man looked into one of the cars and looked sick; I followed his gaze. The bodies might have been human once, but they’d been stripped and torn by something, leaving only skeletons. Their deaths hadn’t been the end of their suffering. Wild dogs, or cats, or something else had gnawed their rotting flesh.

The entire ecology is going to be screwed up, I thought, grimly. I didn’t know much about ecology – and most of what I’d been taught at school had been progressive bullshit about the pristine condition of America before the white man arrived – but I knew that all kinds of animals would have been released since the war. Dogs and cats might be the least of our problems. What about animals from the zoos? They could have been eaten too, but would their keepers know that? I wouldn’t have wanted to eat any of my pets when I’d been growing up, so why would they have decided to eat their tigers, or lions? Oh my...

“We’d better make sure that everyone carries a gun with them at all times,” Mac said, when I outlined my thoughts for him. I’d hoped that he would poke a hole in them, but he seemed to take them seriously. “There really can’t be too many of them, relatively speaking, but what if they breed?”

The wind changed as we started to drive down the remains of the Interstate down towards Clarksburg, carrying with it a sickening stench that I recognised from Fallujah, the sickly-sweet smell of decaying human flesh. I gagged and coughed, reaching for a facemask desperately and covering my nose, trying not to breathe it in any more. It was a ghastly smell and its presence now, two months after the war, suggested that whatever had happened in Clarksburg had happened more recently than that.

We held a brief council of war. “They’re still dying,” one of the nurses said. She had been unbothered by the stink, which made her unique among the team. Everyone else was covering their faces as best as they could. “We should go investigate and see if there is anyone we can save.”

I frowned. “It’s a good thought,” I said, “but what about the risk of diseases?”

“We should be fairly safe as long as we take precautions,” the nurse insisted. She was a pretty little thing, in her way, but there was no give in her voice. “We need manpower and we need to know if they were attacked by someone else outside Clarksburg, someone who might come after us.”

She’d found, deliberately or otherwise, the argument that would sway me. “Very well,” I said, calmly. “Let’s go to town.”

The smell refused to fade as we drove onwards towards the outer buildings, but thankfully we started to get used to it, although I felt dirty and unwashed every time I thought about what was causing it. We’d have to be careful when we returned to Ingalls. If they caught a whiff of us, they’d probably open fire, just on general principles. Some of the final waves of refugees had smelled pretty rank as well.

I found myself dragging up facts from the deeper recesses of my memory. Clarksburg was a much larger place than Ingalls, at the crossroads of Route 50, the main arterial route for Clarksburg, and Interstate 79. It also linked to West Virginia Route 20, West Virginia Route 58, U.S. Route 19, and West Virginia Route 98, all of which meant that it had a pretty low chance of survival. Ingalls was easy to defend with enough firepower. Clarksburg had far less chance of surviving the influx of refugees, unless its government took quick and decisive action, but from what we were seeing, it had clearly failed at that. The silent accusing glare of countless skeletons bore mute witness to the end of an era.

“Shit,” I muttered, as I took in the scene. “It looks like a bomb hit it.”

“It couldn’t have been nuked,” Mac said, seriously. “We couldn’t have missed seeing a nuke if it had gone off so close.”

I nodded. I couldn’t see the Russians bombing Clarksburg just because of the FBI building there, although there might have been a classified target nearby that I didn’t know existed. It didn’t matter, anyway. Clarksburg looked more like a city that had been torn apart by conventional warfare than one that had been nuked. Buildings were marked and scattered by bullet holes, rifle cartages lay everywhere and skeletons suggested the path of the fighting. It looked as if there had been a civil war, or worse...

We dismounted and carefully probed through the wreckage. The city had once hosted around seventeen thousand people and surely some of them had survived, but we found nothing. Buildings were empty, as dark and silent as the grave, while food stores had been stripped down to nothing. We glanced into other stores as we went by, carefully, but most of them had been looted. I smiled when I discovered that a lingerie store hadn't been stripped, although some of the camping stores had been completely emptied as well, along with anything else that might help a person survive in the wildness. I wondered if they had watched us as we drove into their city, wondering if we were friends or enemy, or if they'd all died out in the countryside. We'd probably never know.

The shot caught me by surprise, but one of the soldiers knocked me down at once, before anything could hit me, while Mac crouched down beside me. Someone was shooting at us from another building, firing neat precise shots; it was a wonder that no one had been hit. Mac crawled over into cover, peering carefully towards the occupied building, and squeezed off two quick shots, while the rest of us fell back towards cover of our own. We'd barely seen them, but they'd seen us. A few moments later and they might have killed us all, if they had waited.

"At least four of them," Mac muttered, as he crawled back to join us. Quick hand signals sent our men around to flank them, but we hadn't trained for urban operations at all. We hadn't had the time to run any kind of urban training program, not when there were a million and one other things to do. "They're pinned in that building up ahead."

I looked. It had once been a pizza bar or something similar, decorated in a flowery style that had probably appealed to kids. They were firing careful shots, conserving their ammo, which already marked them as being more dangerous than the gang-bangers. It was almost *professional*.

"No worries," I said, to the younger kids. "We have them right where we want them."

It was a blatant lie. The problem with urban combat is that your horizons shrink rapidly to almost nothing. There could be an entire army dug into the city, just waiting for us to stick our dicks into the meat grinder, or there might be only a handful of them. There was no way to know, short of engaging them, but at the same time that would be costly. I didn't want to waste more lives.

"Start falling back towards the vehicles," I ordered, quietly. "Mac, Section Two will cover the retreat."

Mac nodded. Section Two, five men with rifles, slipped forward and started to return fire, aiming at anything that looked even slightly vulnerable. The windows of the pizza bar had been shattered long ago, but they put bullets through them anyway, allowing them to ricochet around inside. Even if we didn't hit anyone, it would make their lives uncomfortable. There's nothing quite like the sound of bullets pinging off the nearby walls to make someone remember a previous engagement.

"Good," I said, softly. The remaining force had slipped back as ordered. I hoped that they had enough sense not to stand upright, even when they were out of apparent danger. Just because we hadn't seen an enemy sniper didn't mean they didn't have one. "Mac, can you put a grenade through their windows at this range?"

“Can a bear shit in the woods?” Mac asked. I assumed that bears did, although I had never actually seen one shitting in the woods. “I’ll...”

He broke off as a big figure hurled itself out of one of the windows and bolted to the next building. I pointed my pistol at him in one smooth motion, but Mac caught my hand and pushed it down towards the ground. I stared at him, but he had eyes only for the retreating figure.

“Dutch,” he shouted, loudly enough to echo through the ruined city. “Dutch, you stupid bastard! What the hell are you doing here?”

Chapter Sixteen

Each friend represents a world in us, a world possibly not born until they arrive, and it is only by this meeting that a new world is born.

-Anaïs Nin

There was a brief embarrassed pause.

“Crease fire,” someone shouted, loudly enough to be a Drill Instructor. The firing tapered off and terminated sharply. Well-trained bunch, I decided. “Mac? Is that you?”

I leaned closer to Mac’s ear. “Friend of yours?” I asked. “What’s he doing here?”

“Not quite,” Mac said. “I tried to go out with his sister when I was sixteen and he tried to pound the crap out of me. After a long struggle we ended up in the jail, and afterwards we ended up getting roundly pissed together. I haven’t seen him in years. I heard he’d joined up, but nothing since.”

“Oh,” I said. The whole scene was becoming rather surreal. We were fighting an old friend of Mac’s - ok, kind of a friend – in the ruins of what had once been an all-American town. That normally happened only in bad movies. “Lucky you saw him then.”

“I guess,” Mac said. He leaned forward as the massive figure emerged from his hiding place. “He doesn’t seem to have changed a bit.”

Dutch - Dutch Schofield – looked suspiciously like an overbuilt version of Arnold Schwarzenegger. If he had been that big when he and Mac had fought, I didn’t know how Mac had survived, although he could be a nasty bastard when he wanted to be. He might have been short, but he could probably pick up Dutch with some effort, or punch him in the groin. I doubted that their fight had been fought under Marquis of Queensbury rules.

“Mac,” he said. He sound tired and worn, but there was a new spark of determination in his voice. “Mac, you’re alive!”

“You don’t have to sound so unhappy about it,” Mac said, grinning his irrepressible grin. “This is my friend and boss Ed, from Ingalls.”

“Ingalls survived?” Dutch asked. “We thought that we were the only ones left!”

We ended up sitting down with both groups, eating a handful of MRE rations – cruel and unusual punishment right there – and sharing stories. Dutch had been in Salem, another small town quite some distance from Ingalls, and had found himself drafted back into uniform when the war broke out and society collapsed. Their story wasn’t that different from ours. Their Mayor, a driving man with his eye on the Presidency, had pushed them into defending themselves when the first refugees arrived. They might have had a smaller population, but they’d held out well, keeping out the refugees. Others hadn’t been so lucky. Dutch knew, from interrogating some of the refugees, what had happened in Clarksburg. It had been one of the reasons why he had chosen that town for his first salvaging operation.

“They had a civil war,” he explained, as we ate quickly. “Their government just didn’t manage to respond properly to the crisis at all and fucked up what little chance they had. It wasn’t a good place to be from the start and by the time they got their heads out of their rears and realised how bad it was going to get, it was too late.”

I nodded as he continued outlining the story. Clarksburg was – had been – the county seat of Harrison County, West Virginia. The Mayor had taken control from the start and, free of the chaos that had gripped Charleston and a handful of other towns, had tried to keep some semblance of normality going. He had worked to bring in food from the surrounding country – I guessed that one of the groups of refugees we’d turned back had been involved in that, although they hadn’t gotten as far as presenting their credentials – and encouraged refugees to settle down in the town. The latter had been a fatal mistake. The vast majority of the refugees had been grasshoppers, unable or unwilling to adapt to their changed circumstances, and expected the government to do something about it. They might have survived, if they had pushed the grasshoppers to work or starve, but the Mayor had tried to keep them fed without demanding anything in return. The town, already too large to survive, had grown more populated.

Eventually, there had been an outbreak of common sense in the city and the Mayor had been disposed by some local residents. The new Mayor had started to organise a harsh policy of evicting everyone who wouldn’t work, or wouldn’t be useful, or criminals – for some reason, the last days of Clarksburg had been the most crime-filled days of the city’s history – in hopes of reducing the population enough to allow a handful to survive. It made cold bitter sense – a hundred people can last longer than a thousand people on the same amount of food – but it wasn’t welcomed by many. They needed to reduce the number of mouths they had to feed, but...

Remember that most of them were grasshoppers? They weren’t the type of people to put the interests of the entire group ahead of themselves. They were taxpayers, by God, and the government was going to look after them. What else had they paid their taxes for? The smarter ones could get as far as making the sacrifices, but they didn’t want to sacrifice themselves, of course. Every one of them wanted someone else to be put out to starve, regardless of how valuable they were, and they didn’t want to work for a living. The town was on the verge of starvation and they still didn’t see all the writing on the wall.

And then the new Mayor ordered the police and a posse to start evicting everyone who wasn’t an original resident of the town. The posse had worked in Ingalls because Ingalls was small enough for everyone to know who was in the posse and trust them. The small town mindset strikes again. Clarksburg might as well have been occupied by a hostile army as far as most of the residents were concerned. It didn’t help that a few local businessmen took it as an opportunity to take out some of their rivals; social trust, such as it was, melted like snow. The grasshoppers fought back desperately once they realised what was going on, desperate not to be pushed out into the wild lands, while parts of the city rose up in rebellion. The ensuing civil war had been like all civil wars – confusing and bitter – and by the time it ended, the city had collapsed. The remaining survivors had fled, but found little to keep them alive outside the city. Places like Salem and Ingalls were barred to them, while the locusts had already stripped the remaining countryside clean. There was no food to be had and so they starved. It was a sad end for a once-proud city.

“It’s good to know that you dealt with the prison,” Dutch said, after we had finished hearing the tale of Clarksburg. The city hadn’t been nuked, but the Final War had killed it as effectively as it had killed Washington, or New York. “It was something that we were worrying about over in Salem, but we didn’t have the manpower to spare to deal with it.”

I nodded. It was a shame that Dutch hadn’t sent over a posse of his own – we’d have met them earlier and known that we weren’t alone – but perhaps it was a blessing in disguise. Richard and some of the posse had fortified the prison as a last resort line of defence. His posse might have been fired upon before we realised that they weren’t actually hostiles.

“You’re still a lucky bastard,” Mac growled. “I was about to lob a grenade into your hiding place.”

“Good thing you didn’t, then,” Dutch said. He stood up and wiped his hands on the remains of his uniform. “I suppose that we now have to argue over who gets to ransack Clarksburg for anything useful.”

I leaned forward. “Do we?”

“Well, we need what’s here to survive and so do you,” Dutch pointed out, reasonably. “I think we got here first” – he’d answered one question of mine, anyway; they’d been in the city for two days before we arrived – “but you might feel differently.”

“I think that we should work together,” I said, seriously. Ingalls *needed* to know what was going on outside her borders, but most of all she needed to know that there were friends outside, that some semblance of America had survived the war. We really didn’t need a feud with another surviving town. “How many other surviving towns do you think there are?”

“No idea,” Dutch admitted. “Until we ran into you, Ed, all we knew about were bandits and they’ve been dying off recently.”

“Pickings must have been getting slim,” I agreed. The interesting thing about value is that it tends to alter depending upon the circumstances. The *Mona Lisa* would be nothing, but a piece of firewood at the moment, exchanged for a bag of food. The gang-bangers we’d killed had grasped that fact eventually, too late to save themselves from certain doom. I was still sure that there would be individuals, mainly survivalists, hiding out in the various national parks, but anyone foraging through the remains of cities was probably doomed. “Tell me something. Do you actually *want* to fight a war with us?”

“Not really,” Dutch said. He frowned and revealed that he did, in fact, have a brain. I’d been wondering about that. “You mean that if we continue as rivals, we’re eventually going to start fighting.”

“Of course,” I said. “Look, we’re not in the best of shape to help others and I’m pretty certain you’re in the same boat.”

“The *Titanic*,” Mac injected. We both glared at him, but it did serve to lighten the mood. “A man could become King of the World here.”

“Shut up,” I said, not unkindly. “Dutch, we could work together, on projects that we both need done, and perhaps survive. We could build a new set of ties to link our communities together, or we could find ourselves at odds and eventually at war. Can we really afford to fight a war that might wipe us both out?”

“...No,” Dutch said, finally. He looked around the remains of Clarksburg, torn apart by a civil war within a much greater calamity. It was a relief, somehow, that I hadn’t spent much time in Clarksburg before, mainly attending a brief course at the FBI office. It would have been worse if I had known it better in its prime. “I’ll have to check with the Mayor, of course, but I think that he will go along with it.”

“That would be Mayor Glass?” Mac asked. Dutch nodded. “You’ll like him, Ed; he used to be a Marine, just like you. I think he was a General or something before he left during the Clinton years.”

“Resigned in protest over something or other during those years,” Dutch added. I smiled. A Marine would be reasonable about not picking a fight that was impossible to win without suffering mortal blows. Civilians like to talk about soldiers as being bloodthirsty bastards, intent on the next war, and the next after that, but the truth is very different. Soldiers, particularly senior officers, are reluctant to go to war. It is the civilians who really court war and then play politics with the result. “Mac’s probably right. He’ll go along with it at once.”

I smiled. “Great,” I said. I wondered if I might have met Mayor Glass during my own time in the Corps, but he would have left long before I joined up. In any case, we would still share the same brotherhood. There’s no such thing as an ex-Marine. “If you don’t mind, I’ll send one of my people back with you, and one of you can come back with us. We may as well prove your existence to our people.”

“Of course,” Dutch agreed. He grinned up at Mac. “Mac, do you want to come convince the Mayor that you exist?” His smile broadened as he looked back at me. “It comes of being a little shrimp, but Mac’s exploits on the field are well known. They’ll be glad to see him.”

“The ladies will be very glad to see me,” Mac retorted. “How’s your sister, by the way?”

Dutch’s face fell. “She was in Richmond,” he said. I winced. “I haven’t heard anything from her since the bombs started to fall, but...”

I understood. She was probably dead, along with the rest of the population of Richmond. The city would be a Death Zone, just like Clarksburg.

“Never mind,” Dutch said, forcing the words out. “I do intend to finish scavenging around here first, so...shall we start searching the ruins?”

It proceeded quicker, we discovered, when there were two groups. We paired off and spread out, although we always kept our weapons at the ready. We’d seen a few packs of feral dogs lurking in the city and I didn’t want to risk anyone getting bitten. The dogs might have rabies, or whatever other canine diseases there were, and someone who was bitten might be beyond salvation with what we had on hand. We found, much to my relief, a hardware store and broke into it, although I couldn’t understand why it hadn’t been looted right at the start. There was an astonishing amount of tools left there, including some we were going to need

desperately, if we could transport them all the way back to Ingalls. I had a nasty suspicion that the city would be almost out of gasoline for trucks.

Kit had supplied us with the addresses of a few surgeries and medical clinics in Clarksburg, but most of them had been completely stripped of everything, including the patients. One of them had been turned into a battleground, judging from the damage, with all the patients caught in the middle. I cursed such short-sightedness even as we tried to take advantage of it, taking what we could. Some items, including painkillers and even other medicines, were still useable, other medicines had spoiled when the power had failed. Kit had warned us, in no uncertain terms, not to trust anything that could have decayed and so we left them. They would have to be buried or burned in the near future. We couldn't risk someone trying to use them.

Mac located one of the public libraries and we searched it quickly. It had almost been untouched by the fighting, although we found a pair of bodies behind the counter and a pack of wild dogs had set up shop in the basement. They were feral, beyond human control, and so we shot them before they could lunge at us. I hated that more than shooting humans, in a way; the dogs had never asked to become monsters. They'd just been collateral damage in humanity's war. Once we'd cleared them out, we searched the library and removed everything that might be even remotely useful, although I drew the line at Mac's suggestion of post-apocalyptic science-fiction novels.

"We're going to have to go through this place a lot more carefully," I concluded, a few hours later. We'd barely scratched the surface. Somehow, deep inside, I had fallen into the trap of thinking in terms of places like Ingalls, rather than a real city-sized...well, city. There was treasure everywhere for people like us, who needed it to survive, but it would all have to be found. Any surviving electronic equipment would have to be checked carefully, but everything else should work perfectly. The store of cheap farming gear was very useful.

It made me smile when I saw it. Washington had been issuing instruction after instruction to farmers, despite the massive pressure from farmer's lobbies, demanding that farmers become more organic and 'eco-friendly,' to say the least. It was stupid before the war, because farmers knew far more about farming than anyone in Washington or a part-timer who had bought a few fields and fancied himself an expert, but the greens had struggled to pass the laws. They might have even done us a favour now. Supplies of modern farming equipment, like pesticides, would be drying up all over the country. We were going to be forced to go back to organic farming methods...

I didn't know what that really meant, not then.

"We were on the verge of heading back," Dutch said, finally. They'd found little more than we had, although we divided up the finds between us. If nothing else, we were going to have to come to agreements on how scavenging could be governed, even if it were just 'finders, keepers'. "Mac, are you ready to come?"

"Yep," Mac said. He gave me a cocky grin as he stood up. "Ed, we'll come to Ingalls in a couple of days. We'll see you then, promise."

I waved him goodbye as Dutch led him back towards their vehicles, on the other side of the town, and then turned to my own people. We'd loaded the trucks with as much as they could

carry, but I still wanted them watched carefully, just in case. A broken axle would mean a serious delay. I drove, this time, as we retraced our steps, looking at the landscape with new eyes. If there were other survivors...an entire world of possibilities was opening up in my mind's eye.

And I was right. Ingalls was *delighted* to know that Salem had survived. The details of the death of Clarksburg, a city many of them had known, hit hard. It gave the disaster a shape and form it had lacked, despite the refugees, because it had so little connection to life before the war. It still paled, however, compared to the central fact, the one we needed to hear.

We weren't alone any more.

Chapter Seventeen

Nations whose nationalism is destroyed are subject to ruin.

-Muammar al-Gaddafi

As it happened, there were quite a few survivors.

We spent the next couple of months – among other things, about which more later – searching the surrounding area of West Virginia for more survivors. It was an interesting and depressing experience. Interesting, because we were finding survivors in places I wouldn't have expected to find survivors, and depressing, because of how much devastation we encountered along the way. It was bad enough for me, a child of the Big Apple, but worse for Mac and the others who had lived in Virginia all their lives. They'd known it when it was fresh and new, then familiar and old, and seeing it utterly devastated was an unpleasant experience. We discovered a dozen towns that had managed to preserve themselves – sometimes barely – and a hundred places, mainly bigger towns, that had failed the critical test, although sometimes there were survivors.

Clarksburg was a case in point. We – and Dutch – had assumed that the town was completely deserted. We weren't far wrong, but it turned out that a few dozen former citizens – including some of Fart, Barf and Itch's personnel – had managed to hole up nearby and escape the carnage of the final moments. They'd hidden themselves when we'd first visited – apparently they'd had a bad experience with one of the bands of roving survivors wandering around the country – but when they realised that we were scavenging the town, they showed themselves and were welcomed into our growing community.

Yes, our community. We had made contact with seven towns by that time and we were working hard on building up a communications network that would allow us to share information and remain alive over the coming months. Mac and Dutch started it off when they were in Salem – and that town was just as glad to see us as we were to see them – and by the time we found the third town, we even had a protocol worked out. As long as the town remained true to its American roots, we would welcome them into our community. Anyone caught outside a town would be also welcome. We needed all the manpower we could get.

It was a painful irony, I freely admit. In the beginning, the days just after the war, the more city-slickers who died, the better for us. They just swarmed out over the countryside like locusts and had to be repelled with deadly force. If we had failed to repel them – those who were useless to us, at least – we would have lost Ingalls and probably any chance of survival. We certainly saw enough examples of what happened to towns that didn't immediately start barring outsiders from entry to know that we'd done the right thing, as heart-breaking as it was. Tens of thousands, perhaps millions – no, there really is no doubt about it – died so that thousands could live.

But now we needed that manpower. Can you imagine just how congested a single interstate had become, as a result of the EMP and cars running out of gas, to say nothing of blockades and silly sheep – not real sheep, alas, but people who depended on the government to save them from the inevitable effects of a nuclear war – running everywhere? We wanted – needed – to clear as many roads as we could, but even clearing a small road took time. It also led to a handful of unpleasant surprises. The countryside didn't just have survivors, but

bandits, and some of them proved adapt at ambushes. Why not? They'd learned from experience.

We tended to discover that post-war communities fell into a handful of groups. The first were the larger habitations, starting at around Clarksburg's level – ten-twenty thousand residents – and going all the way up to New York City, with a population numbered in the millions. (And, unless they were very lucky, at least a couple of nuclear warheads going off nearby.) They tended to exhaust their supplies very quickly, even under the strictest rationing and the lowering of all social taboos, such as eating dog food. As I have said earlier, if it's a choice between eating food meant for your friendly neighbourhood mutt or starving, most people will eat the dog food and be happy to have it. Those that weren't willing to eat it, of course, starved and removed themselves from the equation. It wasn't long before they started eating their pets as well, ranging from common pets like cats and dogs to really wild pets like snakes and even spiders. (Yeah, I know. Disgusting, right?) Even so, they rapidly ate themselves out of existence and simply didn't have the resources to keep feeding themselves once the supplies ran out. They died off, leaving only a handful of ragged survivors to search for food and supplies elsewhere.

The second were smaller habitations, like Ingalls, where it was possible to take complete control and prevent either a run on the stores, or outsiders coming in and demanding to be fed. Ingalls, Salem and others survived, but not every town that had a chance actually survived. We found towns that had failed to take sufficient steps to defend themselves and had been invaded by desperate survivors, who had either driven the original residents out or had enslaved them. More on that later. Other towns were just too close to larger habitations to stand a chance. They got the tidal wave of refugees streaming out of the cities and simply couldn't hold them all back. The results were predictable and thoroughly unpleasant. We found hundreds of places where the refugees had destroyed their country's best hope of survival though mindless hunger.

I'm not saying that they were evil, never that. A person tends to act in his or her best interest, as they see it, whatever the situation. I would not be happy if someone said that I couldn't eat, or survive, just to allow someone else to survive, even if my family wasn't at risk. If my family was at risk, I believe that I would do anything to get food for them, even if it meant invading a town like Ingalls and stealing all the food I could carry. It was a problem for us at the start – we had to kill people whose only crime was wanting enough food to save their family's lives – but we had no choice. The blame, if such can be awarded, goes to those who started this war. God damn them all to hell!

It did have its odd moments, though, sometimes heroic and sometimes sickening. Like us, quite a few towns had taken in as many children as they could, even as their parents were left to starve. We found that there were thousands of children in the area, ranging from babies to teenagers, all of whom could be taught to be useful on the farms and other areas we needed manpower. Yes, we used children to help us survive. We no longer had time for notions of a 'proper' childhood, as if anything of the sort existed. We were able to find foster parents for most of the kids and most of them fitted in well with Ingalls or the other towns. Kids are very adaptable, more than adults think, and can adapt to almost anything. A handful of older kids had really bad habits and had to be broken of them, but otherwise...they fitted in.

Some of the sickening moments brought home to me just how much had changed. A handful of towns – mainly smaller towns – cherry-picked refugees, taking only the prettiest girls, for

example, and...well, you can probably guess how they used them. A couple of others effectively enslaved refugees, something that I had been unable to bring myself to do – and besides, I had the prisoners for brute labour – and used them for every manual task that could be done with untrained labour. They might have been alive, at least, but they didn't like their conditions. Was it really *that* much of a surprise when they revolted, turned on their masters, and killed most of them? We ended up taking several hundred slaves – and girls, pushed into prostitution – away from such places and finding them better homes. They were willing to work.

(And besides, as the cold part of my mind whispered, they had saved breeders we desperately needed...)

But such incidents were the exceptions, not the rule. Why? American society doesn't sanction such behaviour. We would be contemptuous, at least, of a man who had a private harem of enslaved girls, even if we joked about how much we would like it for ourselves. Yes, men do have fantasies of what we would do if we had girls who literally couldn't say no, but most of us refrain from enacting them, even when given the opportunity. The knowledge that society, far from supporting us, would turn on us in an instant keeps us honest, or reasonably so. I always kept my porn habit a secret when I was a kid, looking at magazines with topless girls and keeping them well away from my mother, and the same principle kept such atrocities from happening very often. We might have no choice, but to turn people away from our food, but most of us wouldn't enslave them...

Personally, I think it has something to do with trust. A small society – take Springfield, for example, even though Homer Simpson's town is fictional – has a considerable degree of trust. Bart, Lisa and the baby – whose name I forgot, seeing I was never a very avid *Simpsons* fan – can trust pretty much everyone in their own and know them all by sight. The thought of being seen, in a small town, as an outcast or villain keeps many people honest, while it also keeps them trusting in local government, rather than trying to save themselves on their own. If Ingalls hadn't trusted me – and Mac, Deborah and the others – to take the right action, if every man had been out for himself, we would have destroyed ourselves a long time before the first refugees arrived. The larger the population, the smaller the relative number of people who knew one another...and the lower level of trust in the government. The people there don't *know* the Mayor personally, they don't really trust him – probably after a string of decisions that were or looked irrational or against the interests of the community – and don't place any faith in him. Why should they? They didn't know him. It worked fine as long as society wasn't placed under massive stress. When the Final War happened...

Well, then it was Katie bar the door.

We found many similar stories in the surrounding area, sometimes from the handful of survivors, or from their diaries that we found as we scavenged for anything that might be useful. You'd be amazed at how much was just abandoned, or simply left undiscovered in root cellars and other places that city-dwellers wouldn't think to look. Our growing community shared information and items; one town had nearly four times as many pigs as they needed – they'd been having a pig fair, of all things, before the war – and shared some of them with other towns in exchange for other animals, or goods. We also started a breeding program for horses and other livestock.

Oh, and bikes. We couldn't waste gasoline in exploring too many places. We used an armoured force – well, a force composed of technicals, which a single Abrams tank would have massacred once the tankers finished laughing – to visit everywhere first, and then it was horses and/or bikes. It was amazing how much more polite people became when they thought that you were riding in a military convoy and that normally gave us a chance to talk to them before they opened fire. The surviving towns had learned to fire first and ask questions later – if at all – after the first wave of bandits spread into the area and so we had to use the vehicles. We salvaged hundreds of bicycles from various towns and put them to work convoying people from place to place. It also helped keep people healthy, almost most of the real fatties had been shrinking steadily on our rations...

The map that was taking shape in the Town Hall was just plain weird, in many ways. There were towns that had survived intact, towns that were barely keeping themselves alive – we helped with that in hopes of keeping as large a population as we could, although by my best estimate we only had around a hundred thousand people at most – and places that could be scavenged for useful goods. (We operated a first come, first served policy; whoever found something useful could keep it, or trade it. It was the best way to encourage trade after the war.) There were also the 'last men on Earth;' men and women, mainly survivalists, who had believed that they and their families were the only ones left. I know, it sounds a little mad, but I believe that we were all a little mad after the Final War. Some of them were delighted to see us and happy to join us, others were less happy – or mad – and greeted us with a hail of fire. We either gave them a wide berth or went after them, depending on where they were. One of them, in particular, had taken up a commanding position where he could shoot men on bikes. The bastard had to be dug out of his nest and killed.

And then, finally, there were the Badgers.

We didn't see many in our area, although we heard later that there had been quite a few near Washington and some of the other larger towns. The only significant discovery was a few miles south of Ingalls and it leaves a bad taste in my mouth even to think about it. I will write about it, however, for two reasons. The first is that it is an important part of the story; the second is that I was blamed for it, later. It wasn't my fault. I only heard about it about two days after it had taken place. I went there at once, mainly out of curiosity, but it wasn't my place.

Anyway...there was this posse of men out searching for anything useful. (Yes, they were almost all men. The only women who went on search parties and scavenging teams were ones who had specialised knowledge we needed, like the nurses.) One of the posse remembers this old house up near the Spruce Knob-Seneca Rocks National Recreation Area, located within the Monongahela National Forest of eastern West Virginia. Some rich guy bought it, he thinks, and suggests that they go take a look at the place. The leader of the posse – a soldier who served in Iraq on one of the teams searching for Saddam – agrees and so they travelled there, finding that the house is intact and apparently abandoned. They break in and search the place carefully, finding some items that might be useful – including a fully-stocked gun cabinet and a massive and still operating freezer with enough luxury food for a small army – and little else, but the leader is suspicious. His experience suggested that they were missing something. As I heard it later, he insisted on another search, a more careful one this time. They go through the house with a fine-toothed comb and finally discover the shaft built into the fireplace. It takes them nearly an hour to figure out how to open it, but finally they get it open and slip down into an underground bunker, where they find...

Sorry, I still see red every time I think about it. They find a man, his fat and ugly wife, his three fat and ugly children and a small number of hangers-on, twenty-five people in all, living in a bunker that had kept them completely safe from the war. They're actually glad to see the posse – they've been going stir-crazy down in the bunker – and perhaps if they'd left it at that, they would have been safe. The guy who owned the house, however, wasn't that smart. It turned out that he was number #467 (or something) on the Continuity of Government Plan – the list of people who would serve as President if everyone above them was killed by the war – and that he'd had enough advance warning to dive into his bunker, along with a bunch of friends. He might even have survived that, were it not for the fact that he promptly started to try to take command. He issued orders and expected them to be obeyed.

Now, the interesting thing about governments is that they depend on their population either being willing to accept them or are able to force their will on their population. This guy had neither and believed, because of a piece of paper issued by a dead President, that he was in charge of the whole area. The posse listened to him for five minutes and got angry. Very angry. This...person had hidden underground while they'd been fighting for survival, he'd been warned soon enough to stock his shelter with everything he could require, he'd hidden and had probably intended to keep hiding...and now he thought he could take control. Their anger burst and they took him, dragged him and his friends out of the bunker, and hung them from the nearest tree. They screamed and protested the whole way, but the posse ignored them, lost in their rage. I don't blame them for that. They'd survived, no thanks to the Federal Government, while they hadn't even known about this designated survivor. The children, spoilt brats all, were spared, but they saw their parents die.

I think that that's about the only thing I couldn't forgive them for.

No one deserves to see their parents die.

Chapter Eighteen

The rule of law can be wiped out in one misguided, however well-intentioned generation. And if that should happen, it could take a century of striving and ordeal to restore it, and then only at the cost of the lives of many good men and women.

-William T. Gossett

I hadn't expected, at first, to be dealing with law and order in Ingalls. Yes, I know, in hindsight that sounds stupid – and not without reason. Ingalls was pretty much a law-abiding town – the only person who really broke the law was the last Sheriff, who was caught with his hand in the till – and the worst problem I had to deal with was the occasionally drunk and the Stonewall Prison. All I can really say in my own defence is that I had expected everyone to be working overtime on keeping us alive, not trying to break laws and act in a way that threatened us all. I should have worried more about human nature; see my prior remarks on self-interest and trust.

Anyway, I ended up serving as Judge and Jury on several occasions. It wasn't a job I relished. The same lack of ties to the community that had prompted Mac and the others to nominate me for Sheriff had its advantages, but also disadvantages; I could do something unpopular and discover that I had little support. The people in small towns are often of a practical breed, but when their community is challenged, they can become vicious. If the wrong person was accused of a crime, that person would have the support of the community and things would get nasty. The last thing I wanted was to create fault lines that would rip the entire community apart.

If you've been through public schools, you've probably seen a movie or two about the evil whites in weevil towns below the Mason-Dixie line. The basic plot is stock. Some poor black man (or woman, for added shock value) gets lynched by Evil White Men and the entire community covers it up, leaving Heroic Investigator to search for the truth, defeat the KKK and other anti-American groups and somehow bring peace and tolerance to an entire community. I always found such films sickening. They take what could be a real problem – as in the community, which doesn't believe that a crime has been committed – closing ranks behind the offender and turn it into a hymn to multiculturalism. It always got on my nerves.

(It did have its funny side, however. One bunch of filmmakers, intent on showing that the enemy were human too, showed a movie about the Japanese in China, just after the Russians invaded in 1945. Unfortunately, they showed it to a bunch of Koreans...)

But it all depended on what society sanctioned. In a nation where treating women as dirt was socially sanctioned, it was unsurprising that women were treated like dirt and regularly beaten, forced into marriage, raped, treated as pariahs and so on. In a society where black men were regarded as permanently subordinate, their tormentors received no punishment; hell, their society didn't even realise that what they were doing was wrong. There's little point in punishing adults without making sure they understand why they're being punished. It's far too easy to drive someone into the belief that they're being unfairly persecuted and then you have someone without any loyalty to society at all.

I'm going to look, briefly, at three cases I had to judge before we finally managed to get a government up and running. I don't know just how well I did while I was judging, but at least I didn't get lynched myself, right?

The first case involved a young man whom I'll call Bob. (Bob, by the way, was the *nom de plume* of choice for pretty much every CIA agent in Iraq. Their incompetence became the stuff of legend pretty quickly and we would probably have had more accurate intelligence if we had forced 'Bob' to walk in front of the tanks towards bridges that might have been held by friendly forces (none were, as far as I can recall, and it would have been shouted to the skies if they were) so that he would take the first bullet.) Bob – this Bob – had been the teenage son of an engineer who had managed to escape the cities and find gainful employment with us, taking his three kids and wife along. Bob had found work himself in the militia and had been courting a girl from Ingalls.

It hadn't worked out. She'd finally decided that she wasn't interested in him and told him so, unwisely as it turned out. He had been desperate for her and, in the ensuing chaos, forced himself on her. No, I'll be blunt. He raped her. Her screams brought several men to her aid and Bob was dragged off her and beaten quite badly, although Jackson turned up in time to save him from being lynched on the spot. Jackson arrested him, dragged him down into the jail, and locked him up until I could return to hold a trial. This wasn't a particularly safe position. The girl's family wanted to lynch him and, were it not for Deborah, would probably have broken into the jail – in defiance of the natural law that says people want to break *out* of the jail – and killed him. That was the situation I found when I returned.

I wasn't too keen on keeping him alive. I'll admit that from the start. A rape victim is rarely to blame for her condition, particularly when she's saying *no* so firmly. There was little doubt that he'd assaulted her and I firmly believed that the blame was all on his side. I didn't want him lynched, however. The rule of law had to remain firm.

Why?

Tell me something. What makes America – and the West – great? What's special about us that is lacking in...say, the Middle East? The answer is simple; the rule of law. In America, all are equal before the law. That's the most important attribute of American society, far more than gun ownership or even democracy itself. Bob should not be lynched. If he were to be put to death, he had to be put to death legally. Everything had to be fair and firmly aboveboard. This was no time for underhand behaviour. Everyone had to agree that Bob deserved everything he got.

(And, if nothing else, what about the other immigrants? What would happen if they didn't feel part of the community, or if they felt that Bob had been hung because he was an immigrant and the girl was part of the original town? They wouldn't feel part of it themselves and that would be very dangerous.)

The courtroom was set up in the big hall. It normally served as the communal dining area (eating together saved food and heat, while allowing people to catch up over a meal and feel connected) but we made a few changes. The dock had been designed by a local carpenter who became a bit overenthusiastic, ending up with something out of a children's tale. It had been designed so that the accused had absolutely no doubt at all as to why they were there; dark, foreboding and tipped with spikes. I had to discourage him from adding chains and other security measures. If we needed them, the suspect could be handcuffed. I wasn't going to have something that created a greater impression of guilt than we already had.

“Silence in the court,” I said, as calmly as I could. I was wearing my dress uniform at the time. I disliked wearing it at the best of times, but it gave me a semblance of authority. “Deputy, bring out the prisoner.”

Bob was escorted out by Jackson. He looked beaten and thoroughly worried. I didn’t blame the girl’s rescuers for beating the shit out of him, but in a different time that kind of treatment would have made it much harder to get a conviction. I didn’t worry that much about it after the war. If he was guilty, he would be judged on that and those who beat him would be judged as well. The fact he’d been beaten didn’t add to his guilt, nor did it detract from it.

“We are here today to stand in judgement of Bob,” I said, and detailed the crime briefly for the attention of everyone who had only heard rumours. By now, Bob was being called a multiple rapist and murderer, showing how quickly rumours can grow out of proportion. “Bob, how do you plead?”

I’d had a word with him before the trial had started. “Guilty,” he said, as I had urged. I had been prepared to make a single promise to him. If he pleaded guilty, if there was no doubt about his guilt, if I didn’t have to put the girl through a second hell by putting her on the stand, I would do what I could to avoid having to hang him. Some may call that dishonest, but we had a responsibility to the future.

There was a brief buzz from the crowd and two of the older boys started a chant of ‘hang him, hang him.’ I glared them into silence. “Your honest is noted,” I said, calmly. “Do you have anything you wish to say in your defence?”

“No, sir,” Bob said. I had urged him to say nothing. I doubted that there was anything he could have said that would have migrated the town’s anger and desire for bloody retribution. “I have nothing to say.”

“Good,” I said. I allowed myself a slow glance around the room. “As the suspect has confirmed his own guilt, I believe that we can move directly to the sentence. Bob, I sentence you to five years on the work crew as a first-class prisoner. Deputy, remove the prisoner.”

Yes, I rushed it. I’d done that intentionally as well. Five years on the work crew wasn’t an easy sentence by any means. Bob would join the prisoners, and the former gang-bangers, and find himself being pushed to the limit by unsympathetic guards. If, after five years of that, he wanted to remain a criminal...well, we gave him his chance. I don’t like rape cases at the best of times – it can be hard to work out who was really at fault, particularly if drugs or drink were involved – and Bob pleading guilty had helped ensure the right verdict.

Ok, I’m a sneaky bastard. Sue me.

The second case was a little harder. We’ll call this guy Charlie, on the grounds that too many Bobs make the story harder to follow. Charlie was a town boy courting a town girl and, unlike Bob, he’d actually managed to lay her. (No, I don’t disapprove of premarital sex. I just disapprove of people who think that ignorance and young people is a healthy combination.) He’d managed to get her pregnant and was now denying it as loudly as possible, claiming that he hadn’t been the one to impregnate her and that she’d been cheating on him.

“She slept with other guys,” he said, angrily. The girl’s father had taken a surprisingly progressive view of the whole situation, but demanded that Charlie pay for the child’s upbringing, even if he didn’t want to marry her. I could only respect her father’s decision. After this, those two kids wouldn’t have a happy life together, even in normal circumstances. In Ingalls, after the war, it could be disastrous. “It wasn’t me who got her pregnant!”

I sighed and massaged my temples, trying to think through the banging headache that was making me want to order them both flogged. He claimed that it wasn’t his fault, although he had admitted having sex with her – unprotected, as the town’s stock of condoms had fallen sharply since the war and we weren’t getting any replacements – and was unwilling to name any names. The girl claimed that she’d only slept with him and no one else had come forward to admit to having slept with her as well. It wasn’t an easy problem to solve.

“She’s just trying to get me to pay for her kid with someone else,” Charlie continued, unaware of my worsening mood. “She’s just another bitch who wants to have a kid and steals my sperm...”

“You’re the only one who had sex with me,” the girl shouted back, angrily. The argument was going nowhere fast, while I could see consensus dissolving all around me. These two stupid idiots were on the verge of tearing my society apart! “You promised you’d marry me when we finally found a place of our own...”

“Silence,” I bellowed. There is only so much stupidity I can listen to before my head starts to melt and reduce my brain cells to steaming mush. Stupidity, I believe, is actually contagious. “All right, shut up!”

I glared at Charlie first. “You admit that you had unprotected sex with her,” I snapped. He nodded, reluctantly. “That makes you the most likely suspect – seeing that you cannot name anyone else who has slept with her – for being her baby’s father, doesn’t it? I don’t know why you believe otherwise and you don’t seem to be able to prove that someone else is a candidate. Therefore...”

I took a breath. “We can do a paternity test when the child is born,” I continued. “If the child is yours, I sentence you to pay for the child’s upbringing and to support the mother as much as you can. You can negotiate access rights with her if you wish, or you can have someone arbitrate access rights if you don’t want to talk to her, but you *will* pay for your child’s upbringing. If she chooses to give the child away for adoption, you will have no obligations, but if the child proves to be yours, you will spend six months as a second-class prisoner on the work gang. Do you understand me?”

It wasn’t an easy judgement. Young people, barely out of their childhood years, *will* experiment and graduate from playing doctor to having sex. All those social conservatives who wanted to ban sex education, contraception and abortion missed that point; kids *will* experiment. It would have been far better to make sure that they all got education, so they knew what they were doing, and then it would have been much easier to deny abortion rights. I’m a pragmatist. I might disapprove of social trends like premarital sex, but they will carry on, regardless of my disapproval.

Some people said, later, that I was too harsh on him. Personally, I don’t see it that way. Life is about making mistakes and facing up to the consequences of your own mistakes. One of

the reasons we had so many problems as a society was that there was no longer any accountability. It was always the fault of someone else. Charlie should have known the dangers of unprotected sex – and, if he did know, he should have taken precautions – and, if he was the father, he was responsible for the kid. I had punished him more for ducking responsibility than for fathering a bastard child.

But what if the kid wasn't his? I suspected that he was wrong about her cheating on him – although he might have believed it himself – because he hadn't been able to name names. Rumours are one thing, but I doubted that he wouldn't have known who his lover was also sleeping with, so why hadn't he named names? Oh, we would do a paternity test once the child was born, just so we would *know* – it's always better to *know* the truth of such matters – but I expected that he would turn out to be the father. If not...well, someone was being stupid. I just didn't know who.

(And it turned out, afterwards, that we couldn't have carried out a paternity test. Good thing I didn't know that at the time...)

The third case was the worst, in so many ways. John Anderson was one of the more isolationist members of our little community. He loathed company – his wife had left him years ago, taking with him his son and two daughters – and the government, for which he reserved a special hatred. He had been delighted at the results of the Final War and the destruction of the meddling interferers from Washington – most of whom wouldn't have known which end of a cow was which – but he resented our plans to survive. His land was his land, as far as he was concerned, and that went double for anything else that happened to be his. He didn't mind us repossessing some buildings and houses that had been abandoned by the owners, who normally lived in the big cities and had never come out to us, but it was a different story when it was his buildings that were being reclaimed. Never mind that he had never used them since his wife had left...

And then he'd taken a pot-shot at one of the farmers, and then at Jackson when he had arrived in response to a complaint, treating him – all the while – to a torrent of racist abuse. Jackson probably deserved a commendation for not rising to the bait and hurting Anderson, but he was a clear and present danger to the remainder of the town. What had been tolerable, even funny, before the war could no longer be tolerated, not when lives were at stake.

The discussion had been brief and acrimonious. "John Anderson," I said, "you are ordered to leave Ingalls and not return to the town." It wasn't my sole decision, for once. It was the decision of the entire Cabinet. It still left a bad taste in people's mouths for weeks afterwards. John Anderson hadn't done anything beyond taking pot-shots at people, defending his property. Sure, we needed it, but where would it end if we established a precedent? There was little choice. "If you return, you will be shot on sight."

And then we ended up trying to establish a unified government.

If anything, that was worse than upholding the law.

Chapter Nineteen

Any government will work if authority and responsibility are equal and coordinate. This does not insure "good" government; it simply insures that it will work. But such governments are rare — most people want to run things but want no part of the blame. This used to be called the "backseat-driver syndrome."

-Robert A. Heinlein

And so we come to the government.

Ed's Iron Law of Government runs like this;

"The more you want from your government, the less it will deliver."

Why?

Think about it. The Government is basically a lot of people trying to run things, right? They have the power and the responsibility – or at least what we choose to give them – and they should be able to do whatever we think they should do, or so we think. It's not true. A government is an organisation, just as a Marine Company or a business is an organisation, and the more you want it to do, the less it can do.

Take communism, for example. Perfect communism can really be summed up as the state controlling everything. The communists and their fellow travellers generally call it something along the lines of 'everything belonging to the People' – note the capital 'P' there – but the basic truth is that everything is owned and run by the government. It seems a good idea on paper – there will be no competition, no duplication of effort and no disputes – but in practice it simply doesn't work. Why not? There's just too much for the government to do. Even if they're all upright honest Soviet Men – the Soviet Union used to claim that it had created a new species of human – they're still going to be burdened with the task of doing *everything*. How can a single government handle it all?

A state can be described as a living creature. If you lower bread prices, for instance, you hurt farmers who want profits to encourage them to work harder. If you raise bread prices, you hurt the poor, who cannot afford to buy bread and therefore starve, a recipe for social unrest and revolution. It isn't a coincidence that most Russian periods of civil unrest started when the shops ran short of bread, or that the Russian government was prepared to buy grain from filthy capitalists like us to feed their people; when the poor starve, they have nothing left to lose. *Everything* a communist state does has a knock-on effect somewhere else. They simply can't make it efficient, even without accounting for human nature.

And humans are ornery creatures. The Russians have a joke that goes something like this. "The Government only pretends to pay us, so we only pretend to work." I prefer a more practical story from my days in the Marines. A fellow rifleman once worked for this really good singer before signing up with the Corps. He was asked to name his price and promptly named the largest salary he dared, only to see it accepted at once. Overjoyed, he didn't bother to question his good fortune until it was too late, when he discovered that everyone else in the band earned twice what he earned. He asked for a raise and was told no. Just how pleased do you think he was? It probably won't surprise you to know that he didn't serve the singer to the best of his ability and left in a huff when told to work harder, or be sacked.

Like I said before, everything depends on self-interest. If you make it easy for a person to be paid without doing any work, they won't work. If you penalise your producers, you won't have any producers. If, as I have claimed, a person is always governed by self-interest, it is important to note that a person's personal self-interest may not accord with the government's self-interest. Everyone who bought one of those Chinese cars, pre-war, was putting money in the hands of a bunch of fascists, but they were cheaper than American cars. People – and this is the fact that liberals and conservatives normally miss – vote with their wallets. They don't vote for principles unless they're rich or secure enough not to need to worry.

And what does all this have to do with Ingalls, you might ask? Five months after the Final War, we found ourselves hosting the first Constitutional Convention. You'd think that we'd all agree at once to form a new government and carry on from there. I know that I expected that the process of forming a government wouldn't take *that* long, but I couldn't have been more wrong. Farmers are political too – hell, almost every segment of American society is political in one way or another – and they were mad as hell at Washington. They wanted change they could believe in long before it became a political slogan and pretty much everyone else agreed with them. If they had all agreed on the kind of change they wanted, the whole issue might have been settled fairly quickly. They couldn't agree at all.

Ingalls had received the dubious honour of hosting the Convention for a number of reasons. The first one was that we were roughly in the centre of explored territory. (The maps might have been accurate on some details, still, but politically large swathes of territory might have well have been filled with dragons.) We could host a meeting fairly easily and, with the radios, help the delegates to get back in touch with their constituencies. I hadn't worried *that* much over security, at first, but between the ten Principle Towns and the smaller locations, we had over four hundred people coming to stay. At least most of them worked for their supper.

I had found a former Constitutional Scholar called Ben-David Singleton and placed him in charge of the Convention. The entire process was already chaotic when we started to organise it properly and I couldn't cope. I – and everyone else in authority – was being bombarded with all kinds of suggestions and a whole series of threats from various interest groups. Some wanted a strict ban, for example, on all kinds of governmental interference in farming, others wanted the farmers alone to have the right to vote and so on. I spent more time than I wanted to spend simply skimming through thoroughly worthless suggestions and discarding them. You wouldn't believe all the shit we had to wade through. One woman wrote in, quite seriously, and proposed that all alcoholic drinks be firmly prohibited, along with drugs, pre-martial sex, private gun ownership and pretty much everything else that makes life worth living. The religious establishment, such as we had in the absence of any links outside West Virginia, wanted some religious laws to be instituted; thankfully, that proposal got shot down swiftly.

And pretty much everyone wanted change and *their* chance to talk.

We held the first Convention in the open air, mainly because of the fact that the entire population of Ingalls – and hundreds of representatives from nearby towns and settlements – wanted to watch the delegates design the new constitution and hammer out a working plan for future government. Oh, there were a few people who thought that Ingalls – or insert another town name here – should go it alone, but the benefits of cooperation were too

apparent for such proposals to get very far. Ingalls had changed considerably over the past few months – every patch of land that could be used as a garden, if only a small one, had been turned into a Victory Garden – but without cooperation, we might shrink away and die. Despite everything, there was enough trust in the *ideal* of American government to keep the flame alive. There are places in the world that weren't that lucky. They tended to cease to exist in the expansion following the reconstruction.

“The first Constitutional Convention will come to order,” Ben-David said, after the first speeches had been made. Every Mayor wanted a chance to address the crowd and, being Mayors, had had to have that chance. I won't reproduce all of their speeches, but rest assured that they were starkly pragmatic, rather than boring and tedious hot air. Ben-David's famous book holds a complete transcript of everything that happened at the Convention. “Gentlemen, we stand on the brink of making history.”

It was Ben-David's pitch and he played it well. “Our forefathers built on this land a great nation,” he said. “They created rules that allowed us to live together in reasonable peace and harmony. They didn't create a finished product, but one that evolved, without breaking. Even the stresses of civil war and racial conflict failed to destroy our nation. What we have to decide, now, is how much of the old we want to discard and how much more we will add to the laws that bind us together.

“It is easy to suggest, as so many have, that we should make this or that little change, secure in the knowledge that we're doing the right thing. I must caution you against any such move. We might create, here, a precedent that allows some later tyrant to defeat us and strangle us in our own laws. We have seen the creation, in the last few years, of many constitutions, all vast wordy texts that inspire no loyalty from their alienated peoples. We can make the same mistake, but we must not do so. I urge you all to look to the past as a guide, but to the future as a goal. We will reach it as a united nation or a series of small entities, torn apart by civil war and strife. We must consider, when we look at the past and see what we would change, if we might be throwing the baby out with the bathwater.

“It seems a silly analogy, but it is one to remember,” he continued. “When the Founding Fathers created this nation, they did not design a finished product. There is much to regard with scorn and shame in the early years of the United States of America. They allowed slavery, an offence against God and man, an offence against human dignity and the equality of man before God, to exist. They treated women as second-class citizens and refused them the vote. We are appalled to think of them as our ancestors, but the system they designed *evolved*! They adapted and added women, and blacks, and Native Americans, the chance to vote. You may feel that we went too far when we evolved, but our society adapted. How many other political states can make that claim?

“And I do not feel that we should discard the Constitution, as some have suggested. I have heard from many – many – people over the last few weeks and most have spoken in favour of retaining the Constitution, with perhaps a few minor changes. I feel that yes, we should consider the Constitution to be a vital part of our new society. I feel that we should adapt it, based on the past, while looking to the future. We stand here, knowing that we will be judged, in the future, by the fruits of our labours. It behoves us to make them as secure as possible. We, too, must not design a finished product. A finished product will merely break at the first hurdle.”

He paused. “And now I throw open the floor for debate,” he said. “I ask people to make their opinions known. The Constitution, old or new, must enjoy the support of the people. I must warn everyone, however, that rowdy behaviour will see the person responsible evicted from the area. We should try to approach the future with a little dignity.”

He received a standing ovation before the first person rose to speak. It was, I freely admit, a very disorganised assembly. Ben-David had planned it that way. The people would make their opinions known, allowing the people who were actually going to do much of the legwork in adapting or rewriting the Constitution to hear what they had to say and incorporate their ideas. It was a chaotic system, but as he pointed out, the appearance of democracy was important.

The first issue raised, much to my surprise, was gun control. In hindsight, I shouldn’t have been surprised at all. Don’t get me wrong; Americans, particularly military veterans, are not gun-crazy freaks. We just have a tradition of an armed citizenry as the final bulwark against official tyranny and the occasional official fuck-up, such as the Jail Posse. If the Stonewall Prison had suffered an escape, we were *not* going to be hiding in our homes while the State Police – or whoever – searched for the escaped prisoners. Quite a few of the survivors of the Final War had even planned to fight the government, or the UN’s mythical fleet of black helicopters, or both.

(Which actually leads into a very important point regarding governments. The people running the governments have self-interests of their own. At best, this results in Empire-building on a small scale, at worst this results in official tyranny. You can’t give the vast powers of a People’s Commissioner to someone and not expect them to be tempted by the possibilities. Russia is – was – studded with the results of such people, from *dachas* that are effectively mansions to massive and completely useless factories. It only gets worse when non-governmental organisations, with even less accountability, are involved. They tend to think that just because they’re a charity, they know better than the people who have lived in the area for hundreds of years, even when they evidently do not. Your charitable donation, far from helping, might have done untold harm...but I digress.)

The argument raged backwards and forwards for nearly an hour before Ben-David finally managed to work out some kind of consensus. I didn’t take any part in the argument, although like all Americans, I *do* have a position on practically anything. (Heinlein was wrong; everyone has opinions on everything, even if they don’t know anything about the matter under discussion. It isn’t just sex and religion.) I suspect that the real issue wasn’t gun ownership, or even gun control, but preventing gun misuse. A gun in the hands of a citizen who knew how to use it – and took care of it – isn’t particularly dangerous to the innocent. A gun in the hands of an armed robber – as the saying goes, once guns are banned, only outlaws will have guns – is incredibly dangerous. If I learned that someone was on the verge of doing something really unpleasant, like a college shooting, I would insist on disarming him for the safety of everyone else. You might feel that I was infringing on his rights, but no one has the right to take a pot-shot or three at the innocent. It’s easy to see why the entire issue becomes so muddy, with claims, counter-claims, and threats. No one is rational when it comes to guns.

I wasn’t entirely surprised at the outcome. The right to own guns would be unalienable for every citizen, although criminals would be banned from owning guns once convicted – stupid, I thought; criminals would have no problems obtaining guns illegally, even if it was

remotely enforceable – and full training would be provided in schools in using guns. That was a better idea, I felt; proper training can lead to avoiding the handful of accidents that can occur when guns are involved. If the myth of gun-ownership leading to superpower status, or at least being treated as bestowing a dangerous glamour, could be discredited, we'd have fewer accidents. A gun is a tool, nothing more. Owning a gun doesn't make someone a warrior.

(I doubted that they would follow Uncle Billy's method. He'd told me, right from the start, that if I played silly buggers – his exact words – while he was teaching me, the first time I'd be spanked so hard I wouldn't be sitting down for a week and the second time he'd just stop teaching me. I took that warning seriously. It might have kept a few dozen idiot kids paying attention.)

The discussion verged onto other themes. The women who wanted to ban everything got up and made a long speech, which was interrupted by someone throwing a tomato with dubious accuracy. It missed her – shame, really, or so I thought – and came down on some other poor bastard, who hadn't been wearing a hat. I took a moment to evict the tomato-thrower and in the meantime the woman had been shouted down by most of the crowd. It always amuses me how many people seek to improve other people's lives by means of the law, regardless of how their victims think about it, and...well, it always struck me as short-sighted. If you want to end a particular kind of behaviour, it's a good idea to pick on something that would give you the support of the vast majority of people.

The more serious issue took longer to resolve; governmental interference. The government had a habit of telling people what to do and that was, naturally, resented. The government had, before the war, been leaning towards the 'green' way of farming – long story there, look it up – and urging farmers to adopt it. They might have had the best motives – they always did, of course – but farmers resented being treated as idiots, particularly when they weren't. Sounds simple, right...?

But...the government was also needed to ensure minimum safety standards as well, and to act as umpire when Management and Labour clashed. (If, of course, it was a fair-minded umpire enforcing fair play.) How could anyone square this particular circle?

Perhaps I need a second Iron Law of Government:

"The trick to maintaining a government is to keep it balanced between doing too little and doing too much."

Luckily, before I could go mad, I found myself with other responsibilities.

We didn't know it yet, but we were on the verge of war.

Chapter Twenty

War is not a pathology that, with proper hygiene and treatment, can be wholly prevented. War is a natural condition of the State, which was organized in order to be an effective instrument of violence on behalf of society. Wars are like deaths, which, while they can be postponed, will come when they will come and cannot be finally avoided.

-Philip Bobbitt

Personally, I blame Mac.

Ok, that's not entirely fair. While I'd been doing exciting things like overseeing the Constitutional Convention – oh joy – and supervising exploration and scavenging missions, Mac had been sitting down with the other military professionals to hammer out the details of the new army. Yes, we had agreed fairly quickly on that the 'common defence' was a common concern, which was a surprising development, because politics before the war had rarely focused on internal defence. The generation that survived the war took a far more pragmatic approach to defence.

It helped that most of the Principle Towns had a high percentage of *real* military veterans. I'm not talking about desktop warriors, or high-grade Rear-Echelon Mother Fuckers who moved from flying a desk into a high-paying 'consultancy' for one corporation or another that produces war-related materials, but veterans from every war since Vietnam. Men who have been there and done that, seen the elephant and survived spitting in the bastards eye, real soldiers in every sense of the word. Oh, there were Marines, Navy, Air Force and other units – some of which had been heavily classified before the war – in the area, but most of them had some experience of being on the sharp end. They had experience in real war.

There's a joke civilians are fond of telling; soldiers – particularly the stereotypical generals – are always preparing to fight the *last* war. In a sense, they're entirely correct; where else could they learn from their mistakes, or their successes? Military officers are not blessed with the ability to see the future, although war games do offer a shadowy glance into the possible future of war, but they can learn from past wars. It's not uncommon for the wrong lessons to be drawn – the Gulf War, which drew heavily on Vietnam, was turned into a brief war that didn't even manage to rebuild the status quo – but again, where else can they learn? The men – and some women – in the Principle Towns had learned from Iraq, Africa and even Central America. They had never expected to be fighting in America itself.

Actually, that's not entirely true. Most of them, like me, had given some thought to how they would defend their towns if attacked, something that probably played a large role in their survival. It's normally good to have a contingency plan, even if it doesn't quite work out in practice. They had saved their towns and, now, were devoting their mental energies to keeping the roads open between the towns. There were bandits in them there hills...

(Actually, I haven't told you about the Principle Towns yet. The Principle Towns were the largest – population wise – to survive the war and had the greatest chances of survival before we started to make contact with other towns. They were, naturally, very important politically and ended up sending the most representatives to the Convention to discuss the future. They all agreed that we needed an army and that, at least, we could organise without having to wait for the Convention to produce a vote.)

Anyway...what they'd agreed on had been a three-tier system, one that would allow them to split their interests in defending their own towns with working towards building a secure environment. We were, to some extent, involved in a counter-insurgency campaign and they're never easy, although in this case it was pretty much a matter of simply outlasting the insurgents. The problem with any sort of counter-insurgency campaign is that people are loyal to their own towns, but not always loyal to the whole country. It had been a serious problem in Iraq. We would recruit and train up a group of volunteers and send them to another location, where they would make themselves unpopular, while their hometowns and villages were attacked by insurgents. The solution we found – finally – was to have people defending their own towns and the story of how we did it makes shameful reading. We should have pushed for it at once.

I'd built the barebones of the system in Ingalls and Dutch and the others had had similar ideas. The first-tier would be the regular soldiers, insofar as such a term could be used, volunteers and trained to as high a standard as possible. (There would be no laser tag-like training tools for us, or some of the other really neat toys that we'd used in our own training. We had to be a lot more careful.) They would spend their entire careers as soldiers, defending the entire United States – which was really a third of West Virginia, at least at the time – and be rotated through the different towns and villages. That wasn't just to get them used to the idea of defending the entire state, although that was a factor in our thinking, but also to let them get a feel for the terrain – the new terrain. Places like Clarksburg and, later, Charleston, no longer looked like their maps. Visiting one of those ruined cities was a depressing experience. I had to remove several people from the scavenging teams after they had breakdowns. The soldiers would be the front lines of our defence.

The second-tier would be the militia. They were basically composed of conscripts in the different towns, charged with defending the town against attack, if – when – it was attacked. They were all conscripts – and therefore couldn't be pushed as hard as the volunteers – but we would train them as hard as possible...and, of course, they would have the advantage of their own ground. It wasn't going to be easy to be them, not when they would be splitting their time between defence duties and everything else – mainly farming – but I had faith in them. And again, they were more expendable than the vets. The vets were everywhere. There were only a handful of them we could take away permanently without something falling to pieces.

And, finally, there was everyone else. Rose had been insisting that the girls learned to fire guns and fight as well, and, of course, the veterans would have to take up arms in their own defence, those who weren't already part of the militia. If the defences were broken, it would be the task of every man – and woman – in the place to fight to the last to defend their town, or face whatever fate the raiders had in mind for them. We had seen enough harrowing examples from various places that hadn't been so well-defended – everything from rape to cannibalism – that our final defenders were very well motivated indeed. I've always said that the best way to discourage a rapist is to ensure that all the women know how to carry and use a concealed weapon. Mr Darwin takes care of the rest.

So, we had the bare bones of a military. What else did we have? We had a small selection of vehicles, the best we could recover, for as long as the gasoline held out. There were plans to build a 1900s era oil refinery and some other possible sources of oil – and we had worked hard to conserve as much as we could – but we couldn't get dependent on it. We had radios – they worked over short range, those that had survived the EMP – and we had some other

equipment, but...well, lets just say that the men of my old Company would have laughed at us. We weren't *that* much better equipped than the Iraqi insurgents had been, although we were far better trained and we didn't face a powerful and well-equipped opposition.

(There were several teams working on trying to obtain an air force, of sorts, but that program hadn't shown any results yet. I let it continue, just on the off chance they would succeed, even though the EMP had crippled every aircraft we had discovered, those that had survived the war. An air force would be very – very – useful indeed.)

What we faced was almost unprecedented. It had been five months since the war and most of the refugees had died out, or at least died down to a sustainable level. The cannibal gangs had wiped themselves out through disease – a human body is not the healthiest of meat sources – and starvation. The handful of remaining survivors had either found their way to us, or hidden out in the ruins, waiting for a chance to prey on the other survivors. Some of them were really sick people who had long since lost any sense of right or wrong. We found a gang who had kept a girl alive – after eating her limbs – for sexual use. The poor bitch died just after we rescued her. There was nothing we could do for her. Others were just desperate to survive, whatever the cost...

And we had to deal with it. We *needed* those roads clear and the surrounding area secure. We had to expand our cultivated land as much as possible and that meant providing security. It didn't help that sometimes we lost people and never even realised they were missing until much later, although that was sometimes the only clue about the existence of a cannibal gang. The stupid ones had managed to kill themselves off or get killed quickly. The smart ones remained an ever-present danger.

We had another mission, of course, but I'll get to that in a second.

Every one of the Principle Towns was obliged to provide a number of soldiers. I had objected to that at the time – conscripts do not, in my view, make good soldiers – but we were lucky enough to have enough volunteers. Ingalls provided two hundred soldiers for the regular army, as everyone was calling it by the end of the day. I wanted Marines, others wanted everything from Rangers to Minutemen, but in the end we compromised on calling it the Regular Army. A good compromise, as they say, leaves everyone mad. I ended up leading one of the units personally while overseeing the training, wearing at least three hats at the same time, but Mac managed to wrangle himself a position where he could take some of the weight off my shoulders. He did offer to do everything, but the commanding officer has to know what is going on...

Hell, in my rather less than humble opinion, there are three types of commanding officers. There are the idiots who want a brigade command so that they can get their ticket punched on their climb to higher officer and pay, there are commanding officers who have risen to levels above their competence – a depressingly regular occurrence – and don't have the slightest idea of what they are doing, and the ones who just have the knack for being a commanding officer. I wasn't sure that I wasn't one of the second type, but I learned, and I suffered in the field besides them, and...well, no one rolled a grenade into my tent at night. The trick to being a good CO is to delegate as much as possible to the Sergeants so you don't get overwhelmed by the petty details. It's not an easy trick, but as I said, I learned. It helped that there were, in some ways, less for me to do. The old Marine Corps, or the Regular Army, no longer existed.

And so we started training.

I got my first surprise when Stalker's Stalkers assembled in the training area. It had used to be a college or university in Clarksburg, which had been designated neutral ground. (I didn't pick the name, by the way. That was Mac's fault. I don't know if he was teasing me or sucking up, but I suspect the former. All of the designated Companies ended up being named after their Colonels, although I ended up forbidding some of the more outrageous names. Richard's Dicks was probably a bad idea from the start.) Most of them I recognised, of course, but one of them was a surprise. It had been almost a month since I'd last seen Roshanda and...well, let's just say that her ordeal had left her sterile.

She'd not had an easy few weeks after we rescued her. No one blamed her for her ordeal, of course, but we couldn't afford a rape counsellor or any of the support that would normally be offered to a victim after such a horrific experience. Rose had set up a few sessions with some of the other victims, but Roshanda had declined to attend them, although she'd kept the AK-47 we'd recovered and insisted on keeping it with her at all times. People tended to walk nervously around her, suspecting that she was going to blow at any moment, but I hadn't expected her to join the army. God knows we could use her, if she was back to normal, but...well, none of us knew what normal was for her. She wasn't a breeder, so technically she was expendable, but...

I just don't like the idea of women in combat, not really.

I pushed the matter aside and addressed the Company. "You have all volunteered to be turned into real soldiers," I announced, as grandly as I could. I wanted – needed – to impress them. It was a shame that we couldn't put them through a full Marine Corps-style Boot Camp, but we'd make do with what we had. "This will not be easy. You will end up hating all of us and cursing us until your first time in combat, whereupon you will realise just why we put you through hell. Good luck."

The Sergeants took control and started to run through everything from basic marching in formation to weapons safety. The earlier training had given them all the basic skills – those who hadn't already had it – but now we made it more formalised. The fifty men – well, forty-nine men and one woman – who made up the Company went through everything willingly, although I heard a few grumbles I wasn't meant to hear. Perversely, I was rather reassured to hear them. We were training real soldiers, not helpless sheep...and hell, they saw us suffering right alongside them. Mac watched me carefully – I think he was worried about my health – but I refused to slow down. I wasn't that old, damn it!

"They're not a bad bunch," he muttered, during a break. "The last few months taught them a lot and they don't have much to unlearn. That girl isn't doing badly at all."

I nodded. The problem with women in combat is that most women can't keep up with the men, as I believe I have mentioned before. I had little objection to having a woman in my forces who could keep up with the men, but I objected strongly to lowering the standards so that women could compete on a 'fair' basis. It wasn't good for unit cohesion to have men doing fifty press-ups (or whatever) while the women did forty. Resentment and distrust (not personally, but of their combat abilities) could tear a unit apart, or lead to lower standards for training and experience. I believe – and I could be wrong – that that was exactly what had

happened to the 507th Maintenance Company, whose weapons jammed when they were attacked. If Roshanda could keep up with the rest of us, or even outpoint them, well...more power to her.

“Give me a week or so and they’ll be ready for action,” Mac continued. “I believe that you wanted us to start heavy patrolling in the direction of Charleston, right?”

I nodded. I didn’t have anything I could put my finger on, yet, but I was getting an odd vibe from the south. There were just fewer refugees reaching our territory and some of them had hinted at someone else organising the country into something new, rumours repeated – time and time again – as fact. I’d actually prevailed on the Mayor to send a small recon party down to the south, but so far they hadn’t reported back. I didn’t like some of the implications, although anything could have happened to them.

“I think we should start probing there,” I agreed. There were definitely at least two bandit gangs operating in the area and they were potentially a major problem. The survivors were the ones who knew to find the root cellars or the mason jars or other survival stocks. Some of them would quite happily join us. Others would have to be burned out before they came hunting for new sources of food and women. “A week, you said?”

“Yep,” Mac said. “They’re good kids, Ed.”

I didn’t dispute that, but it still bothered me. Marine Basic Training is twelve weeks at Boot Camp. Yeah, we had given the kids training when we’d conscripted them, but it hadn’t been intended to turn them into a real deployable army. One week of training wasn’t really long enough to turn them into real soldiers, was it? They’d be learning on the job and death, as they say, keeps his pupils back.

The week went by slowly. I stayed with the kids as often as I could, going through the same training with them – and getting chewed out by the sergeants – and getting back into shape myself. I hadn’t realised how badly I’d gotten out of shape until going through training again. It might have been easier than *my* Boot Camp, but it was still a dry reminder that I wasn’t as young as I once was. Mac urged me to stay back, but I had to push myself...

And then came the call for war.

As it turned out, it was only a preliminary skirmish.

Chapter Twenty-One

Only a fool or a fraud talks tough or romantically about war.

-John McCain

There wasn't much to say about St. Marys, West Virginia, except that it should have survived the war intact. It had a starting population of around two thousand people, including a fair number of military veterans, and a position that could be defended reasonably easily. It might not have made Principle Town status, insofar as any such status actually existed, but it should have survived as we had. Instead, it fell into a nightmare.

According to the handful of refugees we discovered trying to find help, St. Marys had been attacked only a day after the Final War by a heavily-armed band. Not, I should add, another group of gang-bangers, or villains. This band was a group of city-dwellers from Parkersburg who wanted – needed – a place to keep their families safe. Parkersburg might not have been hit during the war, but it was in a mess all the same...and those men could read the writing on the wall. They grouped together, took whatever transportation they needed, and drove out to St. Marys, whereupon they occupied the town and took over. The Mayor of St. Marys had been rather ineffectual in the crisis. By the time they realised that they needed defences against refugees, it was too late. The newcomers had invaded and occupied the town.

As I heard later, the newcomers had all belonged to a part-time survival militia organisation. I never took such groups very seriously. They spent time on various shooting ranges, learning how to use weapons for the inevitable war against the Federal Government (or whoever) and generally did nothing else, but talk. They sometimes collected illegal weapons and stroked them as if they were doing something naughty. The war, however, had forced them to react to a crisis for the first time in their lives and...well, they'd felt that they had no choice, but to take over a town and run it for themselves.

The refugees had been very clear on that point. The newcomers had claimed, at first, to be operating under orders from the remains of the federal government. (If there was any truth to this claim, and it is possible that they had orders from what was left of Parkersburg's government, we never found out about it.) They'd moved in, taken over the defences, confiscated all the weapons and ammunition...and then revealed their true colours. It wasn't as bad an occupation as some – there were no mass rapes or shootings – but the newcomers were very clearly in control, using the families of the townspeople as hostages to ensure compliance. It was, in short, an intolerable situation.

There are, you see, two ways to live off the land. You can be a farmer or you can live off farmers. The newcomers – they called themselves CORA; Citizens Organised for Resistance Action (yeah, right) – had decided on the latter. They sent the men of St. Marys out to farm and scavenge for them, while keeping a firm grip on their families and the remainder of the town. Resistance would do nothing, but cost lives, particularly as all of the weapons had been confiscated right at the start. I would have expected some of the weapons to be held back – farmers can be a paranoid bunch, but they hadn't slipped over into full siege mode before it was too late – but as long as the families were hostage, they could do little. Only a handful of them could escape to seek help. Luckily for them, they found Pennsboro, one of the Principle Towns, and made contact with us.

The Constitutional Convention was still arguing over the precise form of the constitution – or amendments to the constitution – but everyone agreed that St. Marys had to be liberated. CORA might prove an unwelcome neighbour in the next few years, or they might manage to kill their farming slaves and themselves off, costing us another source of manpower. They decided, after a brief discussion, that we would send a force down to St. Marys to deal with CORA...and, if possible, bring the town to our side. If we could liberate them, I had no doubt that they would be willing to join up with us.

Mac grinned up at me as the seven trucks made their way down the road towards the town. St. Marys is on the Ohio River – which might not be a blessing for them, not when radioactivity might have entered the water chain – and there weren't as many possible angles of approach as there were to Ingalls. I'd taken one hundred men and a considerable amount of irreplaceable equipment and vets. I didn't want a long battle, not when there were innocent civilians around, and so I needed to risk them. I had also agreed to try to negotiate first, although somehow I doubted that CORA would be amiable to reason. They had too much at stake.

The thought was galling, in a way. They had set themselves up as the Big Chiefs, but everyone under them hated their guts. If they gave up the power and unity they'd used to take power, they would be torn apart...and they had to know that. It is – was – a common problem around the world's governing systems. If you make the consequences of losing too severe – like losing lives, property or freedom – the government is going to do whatever it has to do to remain in power. CORA had had plenty of time to learn that lesson. They wouldn't give in without a fight, unless we could convince them that their lives would be spared...and if they had committed any atrocities, their lives would not be spared. If we could get them to talk...

"We'll stop here," I said, as if I had planned it all along. That wasn't entirely true. CORA hadn't bothered to push cars or trucks out of the road, so our passage was becoming steadily harder and harder. We had had to pause several times just to have some useless vehicle pushed out of the way. They'd been their normal depressing sight, with white skeletons sitting behind wheels or nearby, unable to escape, and a grim silence had settled over our convoy as we passed evidence of the war. There were just too many things to do and too little time to do them in. "It's only a twenty minute walk from here to there."

I detailed a platoon off to guard the trucks – somehow, I was sure that CORA hadn't bothered to sweep for bandits – and led the remainder up the road at a quick march. I had considered keeping some of the soldiers back, in hopes of concealing my strength, but if we could intimidate them into surrendering, no one would have to die. We watched, carefully, for signs of watching eyes, but saw nothing until we reached the outskirts of St. Marys itself, which had been sealed away behind a wall of defences. The sheer absence of people outside the town was its own message. We had been seen.

"Interesting," Mac said, studying the defences through his binoculars. "That's an amateur playing defender, or I miss my guess."

I nodded thoughtfully. CORA wouldn't have, I suspected, many if any veterans. A group like that rarely would, although they had more than their fair share of posers and freaks who claimed to be Army Rangers, or Marines, or Green Berets. I once ran into a man who claimed to have served in Regimental Combat Team Seven, 1st Battalion, 7th Marines during

the Invasion of Iraq. Does that sound familiar? If that had been the case, I should have known him personally...and I didn't. He had memorised some of the lingo and, to someone without inside knowledge of their own, would have made a convincing Marine. He even had muscles on his muscles.

"That's good and bad news," I said, slowly. The good news was that they wouldn't have so many tricks that a regular soldier might have up his sleeve. The bad news was that they might have unconventional tricks that a regular soldier wouldn't use or wouldn't even seriously consider. The fight could get interesting. I studied the ramparts, looking for signs of buried mines or other interesting tricks, but saw nothing. That, too, could be either good or bad. "Stay here for the moment."

"Don't," Mac said, but I was already on my way.

The defences rose up in front of me as I walked up towards them, spotting eyes watching us with hostile intent. I kept my hands in sight, looking as harmless as I could, hoping that someone would come out to talk. If they opened fire, I was a sitting duck, even with Stacy and Patty covering me with their sniper rifles. A shot at this range, fired by someone with even limited experience, would be very likely to hit me. We had joked, back in Iraq, that the safest soldiers on the streets were the targets, but the joke had never been very funny. It was even less funny now.

A man emerged from the barricades and glared at me. I had an odd sense of *déjà vu* as he stepped forward; I must have looked like that when the gang-bangers arrived to threaten Ingalls. The man had long black hair, a beard and a haunted, but determined look in his eye. He wasn't going to surrender easily. He probably had a lot of faith in his defences, although up close I could spot a series of flaws in them. A single AT rocket would blow a hole right through the barricade and probably kill some of the defenders into the bargain.

"This is our territory," he said, without preamble. The glint in his eye suggested that he wasn't quite sane. He might not have been a Zombie, but he wasn't stable. That wasn't good news. "You're *not* welcome."

I smiled. "I am Colonel Stalker, representing the United States of America," I said. It was true enough, if only for a given value of 'United States.' I had a nasty feeling that, sooner or later, we would run into competing governments. We might even end up with a patchwork state like the former Holy Roman Empire. "I would like to make you an offer."

"The Government is gone, after blowing up the world," the man sneered at me. I couldn't fault his grasp of current affairs, even though he was holding an entire town in bondage. "This is our world now. What do you think you can offer us?"

The glint in his eyes got nastier. "We won't join any government of you religious freaks," he continued. "You're not going to get into our town."

Religious freaks? I wondered. "You are holding an entire town in bondage, a situation we find unacceptable," I said, as calmly as I could. My instincts were screaming at me to open fire or retreat as quickly as I could. A rational person could be negotiated with, but someone who was on the verge of madness was unlikely to listen to reason. "This is the best offer you'll get. Surrender now and you won't be killed. You could even join our forces..."

“This is our town,” the man repeated. “We took it, we claimed it, we run it and we’re not going to let the feds back. You’ll have to come claim it over my dead body.”

That could be organised, I thought. “You’re outnumbered,” I said, instead. The refugees had agreed that CORA had – at most – fifty men, along with their families. Assuming that the women could fight as well, not always a sure thing with groups like CORA (which often had an anti-feminist agenda as well as everything else), they had around one hundred fighters at most. If we hit them hard enough, the remainder of the town’s population might even rise up and hit them in the rear. That would be costly – for them – but it could guarantee victory without wrecking the town. I didn’t want to destroy St. Marys while trying to save it.

“We have right on our side,” the man proclaimed, now recognisably making a speech rather than talking to me. “We will not be the slaves of the feds again, do you understand me? We will serve ourselves...”

I could have pointed out that they had been holding slaves themselves, in fact if not in name, and basically weren’t acting any better than their caricature of the Federal Government, but it was pointless. Groups like CORA see the world through a fundamentally warped point of view, where everything the Federal Government does is designed for evil purposes, such as draining the lifeblood of the American male, promoting a transnational government, allowing corporations to exploit the workers, removing God from the schools and all the other possibilities. I half-expected him to come out with some crap about the Feds having organised the war in hopes of rebuilding a slave society on top of the wreckage.

“Fine,” I said, finally. “If you don’t surrender, we’ll come in and take you.”

“Our defences are strong,” he snapped back. “We’ll crush you like ants.”

I walked back towards the waiting soldiers – expecting to feel a bullet in my back, striking the body armour, at any moment – and briefed Mac quickly. I had hoped that the man, whoever he was, would lead his forces out onto the field and charge us, but he wasn’t that stupid. He kept the defences manned and waited for us to make the first move. I couldn’t blame him for that. We couldn’t keep him penned up indefinitely – we needed the manpower for far too many tasks elsewhere – and he had to know that. Regardless of what he thought we were, we couldn’t pen him up forever...

“Take him at a run, then,” Mac said, finally. “I’ll go get the antitank weapon ready.”

“Take care,” I warned, much to his disgust. “We can’t afford to waste those rounds.”

I studied the defences through my binoculars, comparing them to a map of St. Marys I had found and brought with us, after having marked it with the information from the refugees. One problem with intelligence is that it has – quite literally – a sell-by date. Even with the best will in the world – not always a given in the intelligence community – information can become outdated, or the enemy can change their position when they realise that they have been compromised. The sergeants – who would be leading the assault personally, despite my concerns about losing the veterans – gathered around and I briefed them on their particular objectives. If everything went to plan...

...But of course it wouldn't. No battle plan *ever* survives contact with the enemy. I couldn't name a single war when everything went entirely to plan and the results gained were exactly what the planners had anticipated. War is a democracy and the enemy, that dastardly dog, has a plan of his own. CORA had its plan to defend St. Marys against assault, from us or anyone else, and if they had surprises up their sleeves...well, all hell could break loose.

"And you are not leading the assault," Mac finished, when he returned, carrying the M136 antitank rocket launcher. It wasn't the model intended for urban operations, much to my annoyance, but it would suffice to open the battle. He kept it out of sight from the barricades, but we all saw it. We'd have to keep out of his way as well. The rocket has an astonishing back blast. Personally, I'd have been happier with a Javelin or two, but we hadn't had them in the armoury. "You're staying back and keeping command from the rear."

I was tempted to argue – hell, I *wanted* to argue – but Mac had a point. I was the Colonel in command – they wanted to make me a Major, but I'd had enough of the Major Stalker jokes back when I was in kindergarten – and I was responsible for them. I couldn't hurl myself into the fighting like a young man again, even though I was sending twenty-one veterans – not counting Mac – into the fray. Most of them were, although I hated to admit it, more useful than me.

"Fine," I said, finally. I keyed my radio as the soldiers spread out to their starting positions. I wanted, desperately, to go with them. I had never understood how the Generals felt until then. "Stacy, Patty, are you in position?"

"Yes, sir," the reply came back. The two girls – of three in the entire force, not counting the two nurses at the rear – sounded confident. I had faith in the two snipers. They could have shot a fly out of the air a kilometre away. "We're ready."

"Good," I said. We should have been out of range for effective shooting, but I've seen snipers hit people at distances I would have sworn were impossible. The last thing I needed was Mac shot while he took aim. "You see a sniper, hit the bastard at once. Don't wait for orders."

"Not much of a barricade," Mac muttered, as he positioned the weapons and took careful aim. The cars and other junk they'd placed into the barricade should explode nicely, I decided, particularly if they hadn't drained the tanks or filled them with concrete. "We should just set up a pair of loudspeakers and play heavy metal at them until it collapses."

I snorted back a laugh. Back during the Fallujah offensive, we'd competed with the enemy, pushing heavy metal against the Islamic call to prayer. The racket had had to be heard to be believed and I don't know who won, although we cheated. We used CDs and downloaded music, while the poor bastards on the other side had to recite everything. Don't feel too sorry for them. That wasn't the only racket involved; the Mullahs worked as a criminal racket, while the young men died in hopeless battle.

"Fire," I ordered.

Mac pulled the trigger.

Chapter Twenty-Two

It is good that war is so terrible, or else we might become too fond of it.

-Robert E. Lee

The barricade exploded in a spectacular blast. I felt the wave of heat from the back blast and that was bad enough, but I didn't want to think about what it must have been like for the defenders. Clutching their weapons, expecting to see us charging at them across the cleared firing zones – did we look like idiots, I wondered – they had been unprepared for the antitank weapon punching through their barricade and detonating in their midst. They might have avoided the deadly mistake of leaving the vehicles' tanks full, but as the explosion turned the cars into deadly infernos and sent red-hot shrapnel everywhere, they found their plans in disarray from the start.

I could barely hear the girls as they opened fire, sweeping every visible defender with fire from their positions, shooting them down before they had a chance to react. No, it wasn't fair; it was never intended to be fair. I wanted it over before someone on the other side had the bright idea of slaughtering the hostages or trying to cross the Ohio and retreat. The bridge nearby might have been destroyed – I suspected to prevent refugees from using it, as there were clear signs that CORA had been beating off other refugees – but they could take a boat, or even swim. I just wanted to end it all.

“Go,” I shouted, and my troops lunged forwards. Between the antitank weapon and the girls sniping away merrily, the entire defence was in chaos. We had taught them as best as we could, pushing them to learn to seize the initiative at all times, and they responded very well. Before any kind of defence could be mounted, they were on the remains of the barricades and firing suppressive fire down into the town. The enemy had dug in fall-back positions, not entirely to our surprise, but large parts of the town seemed undefended. I slipped forward, escorted by two veterans who Mac had insisted serve as my bodyguards, and peered forward myself. The defenders were in full retreat.

Their inner line of defence consisted of a series of houses that had been converted into fortresses. They hadn't done such a bad job with them, at least in my view, but they hadn't prepared as best as they could for the defence. Great piles of earth piled up around the fortresses might absorb bullets, but they're much less helpful when it comes to allowing a swift and efficient retreat. We hit them quickly, not slowing down for anything, and threw grenades through the windows. The resulting explosions cleared most of the defenders out of the way, while the remaining defenders either tried to surrender or fled back towards the centre of the town.

They have the hostages there, I thought, grimly. It would make a certain kind of sense. A prison like Stonewall was designed to keep a large population under control with only a handful of people and someone with limited intelligence could set up a similar system. If they kept the women and children in one place, under firm control, they could keep the men in line. Keep them under their guns, keep their reserves in one place...and they'd control the entire town. I wouldn't have bet against them keeping the food stocks there as well. We'd found out that communal dining saved food and heating and they...well, they had other motives as well.

Mac looked up at me. “Ed,” he asked, “do we take prisoners?”

“For the moment,” I said, seriously. It was tempting to just dispose of them all, but the work gangs did need extra manpower. Besides, we also needed whatever intelligence we could glean from them. “Secure them and bring them over here.”

It was a pitiful group of twelve men who were dumped in front of me. All of them were wounded, sometimes seriously, and eleven of them had had their hands secured with plastic ties. The twelve had had his arm blown off and was currently whimpering pathetically. They all needed medical attention, but they weren't going to get any until the fighting ended, if they could be saved. If not...well, I wasn't going to waste medicine on someone who might well die within the next few days. A sucking chest wound isn't actually fatal – as I had good reason to know – but it does require good medical treatment, fast.

“All right,” I said, to the most intact prisoner. He tried to meet my eyes, but couldn't; all the fight had gone out of him after the first shot had been fired. Idly, I wondered about his story. Was he a fair-weather soldier, who collapsed when matters became rather more serious, or had he always had doubts about what they were doing? There was no way to know and I didn't really care. “Here is how it works. You tell us what we want to know and we'll see to it that you and yours get medical attention. You lie to us and we'll just give you a bullet in the back of the head, understand?”

He nodded, once, unable to speak. I fired questions at him until I had a picture of just what was going on inside the heart of the town. As I had suspected, all of the children had been gathered in one place, while the women had been grouped with them as soon as our forces had arrived, both for their own protection and to prevent any uprising. The town's men had been gathered in a pair of large warehouses to the north, where they were under armed guards with itchy trigger fingers.

“Shit,” I muttered, afterwards. The entire situation was heavily explosive. “Gary, have these men moved somewhere reasonably secure and keep an eye on them. Don't hesitate to shoot if they give you any trouble” – that was for the benefit of the prisoners, who were listening carefully – “and keep them back. Mac, we'll have to deal with the women and children first.”

“We could do both,” Mac suggested. I had to smile. It was something that hadn't occurred to me, but if we'd killed over thirty of the defenders in the opening moves, we could divide our forces without having to worry about being defeated in detail. The prisoners had told us that they didn't allow their women to fight – for pretty much the same reason as I was reluctant to allow them to fight, although expressed differently – and they were harmless. I didn't take that entirely at face value, but it did give me some confidence. “You take the first company down to the town hall. I'll take the second to the warehouses.”

“Agreed,” I said. I looked over at Brent. “Time to move.”

“And don't you dare let him get killed,” Mac added, to Brent. “He's got a hero complex a mile wide.”

I rolled my eyes – you just didn't have discussions like that in the regular army – but ignored it, leading the first company down towards the town hall. Progress was surprisingly fast, although in hindsight I realised that we'd forced them to pull all the way back into a trap. If it had just been them in the town hall, I would have set fire to it from a distance and shot

down anyone who tried to escape. As it was, I was going to have to be rather more careful. I always hated hostage situations when we ran into them in Iraq and...well, we needed those women and children. The last thing I wanted was to have to let the bastards escape, but would I have a choice?

“That’s one secure building,” Brent muttered. It made Ingalls’ town hall look barely defended. They’d used slave labour to turn the town hall into a fortress, all right, one that would be almost impossible to take without casualties. A single precision-guided weapon would have smashed the entire building, but while I was wishing, I’d like an entire armoury and the entire 1st Marine Division. That would have made rebuilding the United States much easier. “Boss, stay back. Let us take the risks.”

I scowled. “Then you go out and call on them to surrender,” I said, running through the options in my head. It was going to get bloody if I had to send unprepared troops into that nightmare. *Destroying* the building would be easy, but I needed it and the hostages intact, damn it. “Tell them that we will meet them under a flag of truce.”

Shooting broke out in the distance as Mac led his company against the warehouse guards. One way or the other, there wouldn’t be much time to act. I hoped – prayed – that Mac would free the prisoners without much trouble, but the defenders in the town hall might fear that we would kill them all, now that we were attacking the other defended point. I was presently surprised when Brent actually managed to coax one of the defenders out and escort him over to me.

“I am Colonel Stalker,” I said, grimly. The man I’d faced before was gone, killed in the first offensive, leaving a different man in command. He was, judging from his appearance, a banker rather than any kind of veteran...and terrified out of his skin. Its quite easy to convince people that they’re better than other people, particularly when they have all the guns and resistance is seemingly impossible or hopeless, but when the delusion was broken they tended to wilt quickly. I’d seen that before in Iraq, when the Sunnis had realised that the Shia were finally in a position to seek revenge on them, but this was different. This was America. Things like that weren’t supposed to happen here.

“I know,” the man said. He was shaking, quite literally, in his boots. Having stepped over a line he had believed destroyed, he found himself in what we call an untenable situation. Fight and die, perhaps with most of the hostages, or surrender and face the consequences. I would have felt sorry for him if I hadn’t been sure that he had taken part in the occupation of the town with gusto. Law and order had fallen apart, leaving them in a position of power. “What do you want?”

I recognised the opening and jumped through it. “I want you to put down your guns and surrender,” I said, firmly. “If you surrender without further bloodshed” – the shooting near the warehouses was dying down even as I spoke – “we will spare your lives and those of your families. You will have to stand trial for your actions here, but if you surrender now, you won’t be killed out of hand.”

He winced. “We had no choice,” he said. I wondered who he was trying to convince. Me...or himself? “We did what we had to do to survive.”

I almost – not quite – rolled my eyes. A group as well-armed as them, if they had been willing to work, would have been very welcome in Ingalls. They could have remained together and found something abandoned, or come to an agreement with the town, rather than taking it over on the word of a man who was, I was now convinced, thoroughly mad. He might not have been a Zombie – no, definitely not a Zombie – but someone who was unhinged by the war and left without any sense of right or wrong. A very dangerous person to have around, in other words, particularly with everything so fragile...and he'd led his people to disaster.

"That might be true," I said. I wasn't going to get into a decision about the rights and wrongs of the situation. No one would have understood their position, not least because they'd been on the wrong side, the one that lost. "It is also immaterial at the moment. If you do not surrender, I guarantee that you will not survive the day."

He wilted, but tried to stall. "We want to keep our weapons," he began...

"I'm not interested in bargaining," I snapped. I might have had little choice, but judging by the noise in the distance, Mac had freed the remaining townsmen. If they came over to the town hall, it would be difficult to prevent a bloodbath. I had to have the entire situation under control before all hell broke loose. "You have my best offer. Accept it, or die."

"Fine," he said. "I'll tell my people to surrender."

"And come out with their hands in the air," I ordered, as he turned away. He flinched at the thought, but nodded finally. My point was simple enough, after all. "We wouldn't want any accidents or misunderstandings, would we?"

He said nothing as he went back into the town hall, but a few moments later the big doors were opened and the first men came out, their hands on their heads. We covered them at once, of course, but I doubted that they were hardcore fanatics. They'd already been broken. We'd seen fanatics who couldn't be trusted in the slightest, both in Iraq and here, but I doubted that they fell into the same category. The women came next, clutching their children to them and staring around with haunted eyes, wondering what was going to happen. I doubted, looking at them, that their families would stay together for much longer. Their husbands, those who weren't killed, had led them into a nightmare.

"Brent, take two platoons and secure the prisoners, then guard them with your lives," I ordered tightly. The last thing we needed was a revenge slaughter. The guards would have to secure their hands – both men and women; I wasn't taking chances – and then guard them when they were helpless. It wasn't a pleasant job. "I'm going in, carefully."

The women and children of the town had been kept in a large set of rooms. There had been over four hundred women and children in the building, which accounted for the stink...and their obvious discomfort. I wouldn't have thought that they could have stuffed so many people into the building, but CORA – which was now permanently disbanded – had somehow managed. The smell was unbelievable, as was the haunted looks on their faces; they'd spent months terrified for their very existence, and for those of their husbands.

"You're free," I announced, as we opened the doors and allowed the sunlight to pour into the building. "Welcome back to the world."

The next hour passed slowly, but with a few uncomfortable moments. As I had expected, the residents of St. Marys wanted to extract immediate revenge on CORA, forcing my people to keep them back at gunpoint. After a long argument, I agreed that they would be marched back to the prison and put to work in the work gangs. Their women and children, who everyone agreed had been largely innocent, would be offered other places; the kids, in particular, would be brought up as part of our society. Perhaps, that way, they'd have a better chance.

"We'd be quite happy to join up with you," Mayor Thompson said, finally. He had just been elected in a quite vote, having been the underground leader of the resistance, such as it was. I didn't blame him for failing to overthrow CORA. Their set up had been calculated to make direct resistance difficult and almost always fatal. He'd kept hope alive and that was important. "Just don't leave any of those bastards here."

I shrugged. St. Marys was going to be in trouble in the future, with or without the remains of CORA staying in the town. They hadn't really made enough farmland to survive, not least because CORA would have reaped the benefits of their knowledge and effort, and they might well face starvation in the future. CORA had stockpiled as much as possible, of course, but there wasn't really enough to tide the entire town over the coming year.

"We won't," I promised. "We can also find work for any of you who want to move elsewhere after this. We have far too much to do and too little people to do it with."

The Ohio River stank, I realised, as we stopped near a small dock. Boats had used to go up and down the Ohio, but judging from the stink, something was badly wrong somewhere. CORA had enforced strict polities of boiling every drop of water, a wise decision from them, but I made a mental note to get the NBC team to take a careful look at the water. It might be the result of dead bodies rotting away somewhere, or it might be the result of a radioactive leak somewhere. It would have to be checked before we did anything else in the area.

"Of course," Thompson agreed. He nodded once, thinking it over. He was a good man, in his way, a sailor before he'd retired to St. Marys. "I'll see how many we can send up in the next few weeks."

I went back to Mac and we worked on the military deployment plan. CORA hadn't cleared out the area between St. Marys and Pennsboro and so we would have to patrol it extensively enough to remove or assimilate the bandits, if there were any bandits. I had to return to Ingalls, if only to report to the Constitutional Convention, but I left Mac in charge. I trusted him to organise everything while I went back to Ingalls, taking the prisoners with me, along with a handful of representatives from St. Marys for the Convention.

And yes, I admit it; I made a mistake. I missed a clue that had been dangled right in front of me. I could have saved so many lives if I had acted on the clue, but I missed it completely. It was my fault, for which I take all the blame.

The war hadn't even begun.

But it was coming.

Chapter Twenty-Three

I didn't crash the plane. I simply relocated the aircraft with extreme prejudice, after a complete loss of lift and thrust functions!

-H.M. "Howlin' Mad" Murdock, The A-Team

"I'm surprised to see you here, sir," Biggles said. "I thought that you would have sent someone more...expendable along to the airfield."

I smiled, rather dryly. Biggles was actually called Rupert Elliot, but everyone called him Biggles, mainly because of the World War One flying gear he affected during the first years after the Final War. Compared to a modern day jet pilot, he looked faintly ridiculous, but there was something oddly warming about the uniform he wore. Biggles claimed that his great grandfather had actually flown in the Royal Flying Corps for the British, having crossed the Atlantic just to fight Imperial Germany, but I have no idea if he were telling the truth or making it up. His own flying skills were not in doubt. He had used to fly the Harrier for the Corps and, as such, I trusted him implicitly. I would have been a great deal more uncomfortable with a Warthog pilot.

"I wanted to see this for myself," I said. It had been a week since we had defeated CORA, liberated their occupied town and brought the prisoners back to Stonewall to join the work gangs. There was little happening in Ingalls, or the remainder of the Principle Towns, that needed my attention and I freely admit that I was bored. I had delegated too much and, all of a sudden, all I had to do was oversee it and put in my own hours on the gardens. "Is it really useable?"

Biggles grinned and led me over to the hanger. The small private airfield had been largely overlooked by the refugees - and the Russians, who had definitely not considered it worthy of a nuclear bomb. It had been used for a mixture of business and private flying, but the war had turned most of the aircraft stored on the site into expensive junk, completely unable to even power up their engines. The trend had been going towards more and more electronics in the aircraft and...well, the EMP had put paid to that. The damage might not be as complete as I was implying, but it was almost certainly too dangerous to even attempt to fly most of the aircraft. We just didn't have the tech base to check them all out properly.

"There she is," Biggles said. "Isn't she a beauty?"

I had to smile. The tiny aircraft looked like something out of the last century - which, as it happened, it was - covered in markings from the American Civil War. The Confederate Air Force had patterned itself more and more after the Confederacy in a response to political correctness, which was whining on and on about how the Confederate Air Force was promoting slavery and all the other evils of the CSA, and I had to admit that the aircraft looked spectacular. There was never much political about the Confederate Air Force - it was really a group of flyers trying to keep older aircraft running, including a B52 from the Second World War - but they were stubborn when it came to their name. It had become a gesture of defiance more than anything else and I rather appreciated the irony. They were the closest thing we had left to an air force.

"They intended to disperse all of their aircraft if there was a disaster of some kind," Biggles said. "They flew this one up here to this airfield and then...well, we don't know. The war

forced several pilots into the air in hopes of escaping and God alone knows what happened to them. This aircraft was just abandoned here in the hanger until we stumbled across it when we returned to the airfield.”

I lifted an eyebrow. “But you can fly it, right?”

Biggles looked offended. “Of course,” he said. “This is a L-5 Sentinel aircraft, designed for use in the Second World War. It could fly from a rough improvised airfield, or off a carrier, and there were even a few that landed right in the middle of German positions and took off afterwards. A monkey could fly this plane, sir, and I am a demon pilot. We’re all fuelled and ready to go.”

“And the EMP?” I asked. I had a good idea of the answer already, but I wanted to hear it from him. “What kind of damage did it inflict on this aircraft?”

“Hardly any,” Biggles assured him, with a sniff. “Those fancy modern planes are barely good for anything now, apart from cannibalising and melting down their expensive computers for raw materials, but this baby is still flyable. The only thing she carried that was knocked out by the EMP was the IFF transponder and...well, it’s not as if we still have F-22s patrolling our skies, is it? We won’t have access to the navigation satellites, of course, but if my grandfather could fly something like this without them, I dare say that I can do the same.”

He paused. “The real danger is getting lost, of course, so we have rigged up a transponder here to guide us back to the airfield,” he added. “I shouldn’t get lost, but I doubt somehow that the countryside looks the same around here as it did before the war. I’ve also rigged up a Geiger counter and a few other bits and bobs to keep an eye on the surrounding environment. If there’s trouble, we’ll be the first to know about it.”

“Good,” I said. I eyed the pair of hoses the ground crew had set up and scowled. If we passed too close to where one of the nuclear bombs had detonated, there was always the chance of picking up radioactive dust on the plane. The ground crew would have to wash the aircraft before we disembarked. “Is there anything else I should know before I call my life insurance people to take out a new policy?”

“Oh, parachutes,” Biggles said. He laughed loudly enough to pass as overacting. I knew what he was going to say before he opened his mouth. “We don’t have any. I’ll try my hardest not to crash.”

Twenty minutes later, we were in the plane as it roared to life. It was deafeningly loud, louder than any of the transports I’d been on during my career as a Marine, but there was something almost homely about it. I had never understood what drove some of the flyers I’d met, but perhaps I understood it more now, when an aircraft was completely under their control, rather than controlled by a computer that they directed. It just meant more to them that they had learned a skill and had the chance to use it.

“They were smart enough to keep the original starter and other equipment,” Biggles called back, over the racket. I could barely hear him and was starting to wonder if my ears would be permanently damaged by the noise. “The Confederates were religious fanatics about keeping everything as it had been before, which was damn lucky for us, sir. A more modern

starter might have had problems with the EMP, or even indelicate handling. We're perfectly safe."

So saying, he opened the throttles – or something; my knowledge of plane-handling is limited, as you can probably tell – and we rocketed down the runway and up into the air.

"Ah," I said, as the plane climbed. "This is obviously some new meaning of the word 'safe' that somehow was left out of the dictionary. I don't feel safe."

"That's when it gets you." Biggles assured me. "When you're feeling safe, something always picked that moment to go spectacularly wrong. Now, where shall we go first?"

I wanted to take the aircraft in the direction of New York, but somehow I doubted that we could go that far. "Take us in the direction of Richmond," I ordered, finally. "I want to see as much as we can of that area. How far can we go?"

"Oh, you'd be surprised at just how far this baby can go," Biggles said, flashing me a grin. "This isn't one of those fuel-guzzling F-22s, you know. We could travel for hundreds of miles without having to refuel. It's just damn slow, you know." He paused. "Still, we'll have to see how far we get before we reach bingo fuel. I don't want to have to put down in unexplored territory."

His words stung slightly, a reminder that most of the United States was unexplored territory these days. I had hopes of using the aircraft to locate other surviving settlements and other survivors, but he was right. We couldn't take risks with our only aircraft. Back when I'd been in Afghanistan, we'd had hundreds of briefings and warning notes about the possibility of an aircraft crashing somewhere in the badlands, where recovering it and the crew would be almost impossible. Here, it was possible that we'd run into friends and allies, but equally possible that we would run into more bandits like CORA. God alone knew just what there was over the next hill. It bothered me more than I cared to admit. Expanding might prove to be the key to our survival...or it might embroil us in an endless series of tiny conflicts.

"Look," Biggles said, as we passed over the Spruce Knobs National Recreation Area and the Monongahela National Forest, heading down towards Lexington. I had had hopes of finding allies at Lexington. It was close to the Virginia Military Institute, which had been turning out cadets for hundreds of years, and should have had a fair chance at survival. You would be amazed to discover how many supplies are stored at training centres. No one shoots off bullets and ammunition like the new trainees. "I think that that's a bad sign."

I couldn't disagree. Where Lexington had been, or where we thought Lexington had been, seeing as we had no GPS or other navigational system, there was a massive black crater. It was surrounded by the ruins of a town...and, looking down more carefully, I think it was actually several craters. The counter clicked once, alarmingly, and Biggles moved us back up towards the Institute. It had been destroyed long ago.

"They must have regarded it as a target," Biggles said, shocked. Something, at last, had punched through his demeanour. "What the hell were those cadets doing to deserve such treatment?"

I said nothing. There was a form of nuclear strike plan that involved destroying a country's ability to rebuild. The Virginia Military Institute and Lexington might not have been priority targets for the early parts of the war – although I had a sneaking suspicion that the Institute might also have served as a command and control centre for forces if everything senior had been knocked out – but they could have contributed much to the national recovery. Trained and armed cadets, led by veterans from the Gulf, Iraq, and years of attempted nation-building would have had an significant effect. They had been targeted in order to prevent any such reconstruction from taking place.

“Look,” Biggles said, pointing into the distance. A lone plume of smoke was rising up into the sky. “Do you want to take a look at that?”

“Of course,” I said, breaking out of my despair. I hadn't really wanted this look at America after all. Logic and reason told me that I was only seeing a tiny slice of post-war America, but I was in no state to think rationally. The task of rebuilding the United States would never be completed in my lifetime. “Let's see who's still alive.”

The familiar scenes from post-war Clarksburg and other towns greeted us as we swept east. There were lines of cars, some of them entire rows of burned out cars where the heat flash from the nukes had spread over them and blown them into flaming death-traps. Others had been untouched by the heat, but had been abandoned by their owners after the fuel ran out, lying there mourning the death of suburban America. Some towns looked surprisingly intact, although we saw no signs of human life, others looked as if a herd of locusts had swept through them and eaten them out of house and home. It might well have almost exactly been what had happened. The refugees might have broken in and destroyed any hope of survival.

“There,” Biggles said. “They're alive!”

I smiled wanly as we started to orbit a town that was definitely still alive, ringed with walls and watchtowers, and burning...something in a pit nearby. I stared down, looking for signs of life, and was rewarded by sighting a handful of people, staring up at us and waving. I waved back – I had always wanted people in planes to do that when I had been a kid – although they probably couldn't have seen me, unless they had binoculars or something similar.

“Friendly lot,” Biggles said, cheerfully. He'd taken us lower, low enough that we could make out a woman waving at us. She'd removed her top and her bare breasts bounced invitingly in the sun. I cringed. I like breasts as much as the next man, but she was risking exposure to all kinds of radiation. “Hey, sir, you want to land?”

I shook my head. “Not now, no,” I said. I scavenged around in the cockpit, looking for anything I could use to give them a message, but found nothing apart from an old tin of some kind of soda. I found myself seriously considering sticking a message in that and dropping it on them for a long moment before realising that if I hit someone with it, it would probably be fatal. The first bombs dropped over the battlefield back in the First World War had been tiny metal arrows. The explosives had come later. Landing was tempting, I had to admit, but we knew nothing about this particular group. We would have to send a ground party to investigate...

Which would mean going near the site of a nuclear explosion.

Shit.

“Waggle our wings and then take us back to the airfield,” I ordered, calmly. “We’ll have to put together a ground team to visit and find out what they’re like.”

“We’re not going to land among the savages, then?” Biggles asked, wryly. “We could have had some fun escaping if they had been hostile.”

The thought had crossed my mind. “This aircraft is too important,” I said, flatly. “We’ll take a look at the national park on the way home, but we can’t land unless it’s a real emergency.”

We turned away from the town and headed back towards the west. I suspected – hoped – that they would see our bearing and head west after us, which would be a pleasant change. We had contacts all along the westward side of the Monongahela National Forest – which had been infested with survivalists, campers and desperate people trying to survive – and if they came through the forest, they’d make contact with us. It would be nice to have more contacts. Every group of survivors we found would improve our morale and our own chances of permanent survival.

“I was just feeling horny too,” Biggles said. He pushed a leer into his tone. “Flying always excites me. Did you know that they’ve improved the tone of the nearby town by putting a whorehouse in what was once a lawyer’s office?”

I nodded, once. Some of the refugees we’d taken in – or the other towns had taken in – had been useless for anything, but brute labour...or prostitution. I wasn’t that happy about it, and nor were any of the religious people in the towns, but it was something that kept a lot of people happy. We supervised as best as we could, just to prevent the girls from being exploited any further by pimps (and I was sure that we would develop them sooner or later), but I wasn’t comfortable with it. Rose would have killed me, of course, if I had thought about entering a whorehouse in anything other than a professional role.

It reminded me, too much, of Charlie and the girl he had gotten pregnant. To allow men to visit whores while keeping women away from pre-marital sex was the height of hypocrisy. What’s good for the goose, as they say, is good for the gander. I didn’t mind if girls did have sex before marriage, but I wanted to ensure that any children were well looked after. I would have preferred for Charlie to marry her, but if he genuinely believed that she had cheated on him, what kind of married life would they have? I certainly wasn’t going to encourage wife beating or abuse. The man who abuses his own wife is the lowest form of life and should be ritually horsewhipped. I would be quite happy to do it myself, even if it were uncomfortably like the Taliban’s treatment of those they considered sinners.

“Here we are,” Biggles said, as we touched down on the airfield. Time had just sped by. I hadn’t even realised how long we’d been in the air, but I felt stiff and cramped as I climbed out of the aircraft, once it had been hosed down. We did a brief check for radioactivity and found very little, thankfully. “Any chance of a tip?”

“Sell gold, buy potatoes,” I said, and laughed.

There was a messenger waiting for me. “Sir, I have an urgent message from Doctor Nelson,” he said, as I staggered away from the plane, trying to knock some feeling back into my muscles. We’d set up a system of motorbike messengers for messages that couldn’t be transmitted over the airwaves, but we had to keep them for special occasions as they drained too much of our fuel. “He wants you back at Ingalls at once. I’m afraid it’s bad news.”

Chapter Twenty-Four

What hatred have we for the traitor within? No – I mean not the traitor that hides amongst us. For it is our very flesh that is the greatest of traitors, the betrayer who corrupts and weakens us more than any other foe. It is the enemy within that we harbour unknowingly. His name is mutant, witch and deviant. He is the foe that will destroy us as no other can. He leads us before a hellish throne to dance enfeebled and imbecilic for the lewd pleasures of dark gods.

-The Imperium of Man, Warhammer 40,000

“I’ve kept this under wraps for the moment, but the news will leak out sooner or later,” Kit said, as soon as I arrived at his clinic. The sun was setting and I was tired, but I didn’t dare rest, not yet. I needed to know what was so urgent that I would be summoned back to Ingalls. “I know, Emily knows, the mother knows, but no one else. It won’t last.”

He led me inside the clinic and into one of the seal patient rooms, allowing me to glance through a window at a woman lying on the bed, fast asleep. She looked haunted, somehow, despite her slumber, lost in a nightmare from which she could never awake. I recognised her, vaguely, as one of the refugee women, a lady who had been the wife of a soldier lost somewhere overseas. She had been pregnant when she arrived in Ingalls, accepted because she was also a part-time medic and teacher...and because few of us would have turned a pregnant woman out to die. She had escaped one of the nuclear blasts and her story had been nightmarish. Her name was Kristy, I recalled now; Kristy Stevenson.

“I don’t understand,” I said, puzzled. I don’t like peeking on women when they’re asleep and as tired as I was, I couldn’t put two and two together. “What’s wrong with her? Disease?”

“No,” Kit said, annoyed. “*Look* at her.”

I saw, finally. “She’s given birth,” I said, puzzled. “What...”

“Come and see,” Kit said. He managed a faint half-laugh. “I hope that you haven’t eaten anything today, Ed. Hold this.” He passed me a bucket as we led me into the next room. It stank of...something, a strange mixture of blood and piss and something I didn’t want to think about, worse even than the smell of rotting flesh that hung around the dead towns and cities. “Look.”

I looked and felt my gorge rise. The shape in the small cradle might have been intended to be a child, but it was a cruel mockery of one. It was naked, without either penis or vagina, its flesh a mottled purple colour that suggested that it had choked to death. It had only one eye and no nose, its flesh marked with signs of a desperate and lost struggle for survival. I felt a kind of fascinated horror as I stared at it, unable to look away, even as I drank in the detail...

I spun away and was violently sick into the bucket.

“The child was premature by at least a month,” Kit said. “That isn’t always fatal, although we don’t have the proper equipment here to ensure survival for any unhealthy baby, but the cellular damage was certainly fatal. It was gestating in her womb long enough to become really warped.”

I shuddered. I had thought myself used to horror, but this was a new one. It wasn't a fellow Marine hurt and wounded, it wasn't yet another dead insurgent, it wasn't a raped and murdered woman, killed for daring to wear makeup, it wasn't the common or mundane horror of war, but something else, something new. I had known some of the implications of nuclear war before, from my studies, but now I was face to face with one of the most disastrous results. I didn't want to even *think* about it, but I had no choice. What else could we do?

"She was pregnant when she arrived," I said, ten minutes later. Kit had dragged me out of the room, given me a medicinal drink that left my teeth feeling as if someone had operated on them without drugging them first, and sat me down in his office. I hadn't spent much time here, although it was pitched to make a straight man rather uncomfortable, but I almost welcomed it. "How many others are pregnant now?"

"Two hundred and twelve," Kit said, softly. "She was one of five women who were pregnant when they arrived here, the others all became pregnant within the next few months of the war. Someone who became pregnant in the last month might be unaware of her condition yet. Our food problems meant that most of the girls had some disruption of their monthly cycles. Stress and...other problems will have sent their cycles out of order, so we actually had several girls who thought they were pregnant and weren't." He laughed without humour. "One of them was still a virgin, for God's sake."

He held up a hand before I could say anything. "But how many of them are carrying a mutant child...Ed, I don't have the slightest fucking idea," he continued. It was rare to hear Kit swear. He normally kept his words and deeds very clean. The only time I'd heard him swear was when he was chewing someone out for not taking care of themselves, or for injuring themselves in a dangerous sport. "I don't even have a way of finding out either."

I frowned. "Ultrasound?"

"It's a possibility," Kit conceded. He shook his head. "I ran a basic check-up on all of the pregnant women every month and...well, what happened to the poor bitch in there went right past me. I didn't even know that anything was wrong until she went into labour and gave birth. As soon as I saw the child..."

He shuddered. "You won't have noticed, but the poor creature didn't have any brain either," he said. "It's never even had a chance of survival, even if we had a fully-prepared intensive care unit here; it would have died within days. Babies have been born without brains before, Ed, and all of them have died. I don't even know why that surprised me when I found out about it."

Perhaps that's because so many people walk around without showing any signs of actually possessing a brain, the morbid side of my mind whispered. I wished that Mac were in Ingalls, but he was still down in the south, organising anti-bandit patrols and bringing St Marys into the growing alliance. I could have discussed this with him, but who else would have understood? Rose? Deborah? Hell, I should discuss it with the Mayor, although I understood why Kit had come to me first. He wanted me to give him good news, or theory that might have spared most of the girls from the threat of carrying a mutant child, but I had nothing.

“Kristy Stevenson,” I said, thoughtfully. I was searching for hope, I knew, but I couldn’t stop looking. “How...she was near one of the blasts, wasn’t she? Was that when it happened?”

“I suspect so,” Kit said. “In hindsight, we should have wondered about the possibility, but she wasn’t carrying any dangerous radioactive particles on her...”

I nodded. Any *really* dangerous radioactive particles have a half-life measured in minutes or hours, or days at the most. In the time between being contaminated and reaching Ingalls, Kristy could have lost all of the radioactivity, or enough to pass without being noticed. She hadn’t contracted radiation poisoning herself, which was something of a surprise, but if she’d been very lucky, it would have passed her by and gone into her child instead. It wouldn’t have needed much radiation to warp the developing foetus beyond any hope of survival. There is a certain randomness to radiation and how it affects people. A small dose might leave no apparent harm, but the cancer would be growing away, out of sight. A *really* tiny dose might even be beneficial.

“Does she know?” I asked. “Did she see the child?”

“Yes,” Kit said. “I didn’t react fast enough to prevent her seeing her child. I hit her with enough of a sedative to keep her out of it for a few more hours, but in the morning she will awaken and know what happened to her. We have to decide how to handle it by then.”

I grimaced. “And the other girls?”

“I believe that the ones who became pregnant here will be safe,” Kit said, “but I cannot guarantee that. There are several relationships between town girls and refugee boys, and vice versa, and if the guy was infected with radiation poisoning as well...”

“Shit,” I said.

“It gets worse,” Kit continued. “I don’t know much about radiation-affected children – Marvel Comics has a lot to answer for – but I do know that we simply don’t have the resources to provide for hundreds of handicapped children. We simply can’t deal with them all...hell, if we discover in advance that a child is going to be handicapped, we could abort it, but...”

I recalled, grimly, going to a chick-flick with a former girlfriend, back before going to Iraq. It had been about a boy who’d been brought up in a sterile bubble because the poor bastard was unable to tolerate even the slightest touch of a germ – or something – and his romance with a girl who accidentally discovered the bubble one day. It had a terribly sappy ending – true love conquers all – but I knew that we weren’t going to be that lucky. I wasn’t lucky either; two months of dreadful movies and I didn’t ever get to see her naked. We couldn’t have more than one or two such bubbles...and we might have hundreds of mutant children. Kit had been right. Marvel Comics had a *lot* to answer for.

And I didn’t even want to *think* about aborting the children, but he was right, again. We might have no choice, but to abort a contaminated baby before he or she could be born, but if we couldn’t tell if a child was contaminated...*shit*.

“Is there no way we can tell in advance if a baby has been contaminated?” I pleaded, finally. “Is there nothing we can use to look into the womb?”

“Not with the gear I have on hand,” Kit said. “Abortions, ideally, are carried out as soon as possible, before the child even starts to develop. We might be able to pick out a seriously malformed child quickly, but...we completely missed Kristy Stevenson, even though I was keeping an eye on her. It was my fault, Ed.”

“No it fucking wasn't,” I said, tightly. I wasn't going to put up with self-pity. I was in charge, so if there was any panicking to be done, I was going to do it. I said that to Kit and he laughed, despite himself. “I think we need to take this to the Mayor and the remainder of the Cabinet.”

An hour later, we met in the Mayor's office. I had invited Deborah and Rose along as well, just before giving Jackson some specific orders if we ended up with a riot on our hands. When the news got out, and I knew we couldn't keep it under wraps for longer than a few days at most, there was going to be panic. People would start shouting accusations back and forwards and our order would collapse into chaos. I couldn't let that happen.

“So,” Walter said, after we had finished explaining the situation, “what do we do?”

I shared his concern. He had taught most of the pregnant girls in his school, before he had been elected Mayor, and would have known them. He might not have liked some of them, or wanted to get rid of others as quickly as he could, but they had all been his charges. He would have felt the same way about the boys, some of whom were going to end up fathers to monsters. I hadn't even thought about one possibility. Rose and I had been lovers for three months. Was *she* pregnant now too?

“We don't try to hide this for a moment,” Deborah said, firmly. She still astonished me from time to time, even though I was technically her boss. When she spoke, people listened to her and respected her. “We cannot hide this, or panic will take over. When people hear the words radiation, nuclear war, and fallout, the dinosaur brain takes over and they start running around screaming.”

“When in danger or in doubt,” Rose added, “run in circles, scream and shout.”

“Exactly,” Deborah said, as I rolled my eyes at Rose, who stuck out her tongue at me. “We call a meeting tomorrow morning of everyone and explain the truth as calmly as we can, including all the dangers. We tell them what we know about radioactive fallout and the dangers, such as they are, and we explain just how limited the risk is...”

“There'll be a pogrom,” Rose said. Her voice darkened. Perhaps she'd been having the same thoughts I had. “They'll want to get rid of all of the refugee men and women, even if they don't know that they have been contaminated. We'll have to protect them, sir.”

I nodded. One problem with military units is that they tended to feel a loyalty to the area they came from, which is a great thing...except when it isn't. The units we had raised from Ingalls and the other Principle Towns would be loyal to their own towns and would probably agree that driving out the refugees was the only course of action we could take, unless we could explain the truth. The only refugees who were likely to be dangerous would be the

ones who had been too near a nuclear blast...but who know what was too near? A mile, two miles, ten miles, a hundred miles...?

“We will,” I said. It was one of the reasons I had sent Jackson off on his own job. I wanted a very quiet lockdown of Ingalls if chaos did break out. “Mr Mayor, I move that we call a meeting for tomorrow morning.”

Walter nodded. “How much more of this can we take, Ed?” He asked, rather plaintively. “How many more disasters are we going to face in the next few months? What happens if the crops are poisoned, or worse...?”

“It doesn’t matter,” I said, firmly. “We’re trapped here. We’re not in a situation that can be avoided just by declaring the exercise over” – I had always distrusted those training exercises, where bad weather or even, in one notable case, the accidental shooting of the commanding officer, had derailed training – “or by anything other than mass suicide.”

“True,” Walter agreed. The suicide rate in Ingalls had never been very high, but a handful of the refugees had taken their lives or retreated into their own minds, becoming Zombies. We’d kept people working as hard as possible just to prevent them from thinking too much about how the entire world had been knocked back to the Stone Age. “I’ll call the meeting at once.”

It went about as well as could be expected. Walter made the first speech, as was his duty, but then Deborah had taken the stand and calmed everyone down through direct force of personality. Her lashing tongue prevented immediate panic, as did Kit’s calm dispassionate assessment of the risks. He might have been homosexual, but he was respected in the community and no one questioned his expertise. He was particularly popular with the women of the community, for some reason, probably because they knew he had no interest in getting into their panties. In the end, there was no panic, but I suspected that we hadn’t even scratched the surface yet. We’d see what happened when the next two malformed children arrived.

“There is no way to tell who might give birth to a malformed child,” Kit said, calmly, “but there is no reason to believe that the vast majority of people have been contaminated, particularly those who had remained within Ingalls and followed the rules on limiting exposure to the environment. The vast majority of children should be born safely.”

(We buried Kristy Stevenson’s child behind the clinic in an unmarked grave. It wasn’t something we wanted to show people. It would have made the abstract threat all too real. Most of the malformed children ended up being buried in the same place, kept together, without even a proper headstone. It was a different and difficult time for us all.)

And then a messenger arrived from the south.

I skilled the message quickly and with increasing disbelief. Dutch, who had been on duty to the south, south of Pennsboro, had been on patrol when they had sighted a small group of refugees fleeing northwards. They had moved to intercept them, only to be fired upon by their pursuers, who didn’t even bother to ask questions first before opening fire. There had been a brief and vicious gun battle, after which the newcomers had retreated, leaving behind a pair of dead bodies and the fugitives. Dutch had intercepted them, taken them back to the

forward operating base – the FOB, as we chose to call it, in memory of happier times – and asked questions. They were more than happy to answer, just desperate to avoid being sent back where they had come from. Their story was terrifying.

I should have seen it just after St Marys, but I had missed the clue in my determination to end the fighting before one of my people got killed, or crippled. The men and women of CORA hadn't known about Ingalls, or us, they'd thought that we were a different group. Their exact words had been 'religious freaks...'

We had made first contact with the Warriors of the Lord.

Chapter Twenty-Five

The difference between a cult and an established religion is sometimes about one generation.
-Scott McLemee

I'm going to have to go back a little here, several years before the war. We didn't know all of this at the time, of course. We pieced it together after the war. I think we have everything in order, but...well, plenty of records were turned into dust and ash after the bombs fell and we might not have gotten everything perfect. Personally, I don't understand why we even came so close to disaster, but one of America's key values is religious freedom, even if it threatens our own security.

The Warriors of the Lord started life as the Church of the Rapturous Awakening in California, by a man who styled himself the Prophet Zechariah. Zechariah was, if I recall my bible correctly, the last man, hence the name...or perhaps it had some other meaning. It rang true as the last man, however, which was probably why Zechariah chose the name. I don't know what his name was before the war – records have been lost completely, probably by design – but I'd bet good money that it was something rather less striking. He was probably called Roy Scranton or something else that people made fun of, although Zechariah wasn't exactly a serious name. Hell, for all I knew, he was picked on at school. What else would explain his desire to gain power, power, and more power?

Anyway...the Church of the Rapturous Awakening was an offshoot of an offshoot of Christianity, based around a belief in the Rapture. There was quite a lot of it around just before the year 2000, when some of them believed that Christ was coming back and they didn't dare face up to Him, but I don't know how sincere Zechariah was in his beliefs. The basic core of the Rapture belief was that one day Jesus would come and take the believers – which meant, effectively, everyone who agreed with them and all the world's children, who were innocents – to heaven with him, while the remainder of the world's population would be put through a seven year period of torment, suffering, and woe. The ones who converted in the tribulation period, as it was popularly called, would be saved. Those who hewed to the antichrist would be thrown into the deepest pits of hell and left there forever.

Now, I'm going to digress a little. It has always struck me that quite a few of the real believers are consumed with their own guilt. They jerk around, eyes flickering nervously from side to side, trying to convince as many people to accept Jesus Christ, Son of God, into their hearts. It's a guilt trip for them. If they don't invite as many people as possible, they feel guilty, and if they fail to convert anyone, they feel guilty. Their pastors and other leaders encourage this. It helps to bring in the believers, which they can turn into a political force to reshape the country in their image. They hate homosexuals, feminists, Muslims and anyone else who disturbs the human mind. They're the ones who send Christian missions to Muslim countries, they're the ones who push for laws against homosexuality and they're the ones who preach, firmly, that a woman should be barefoot and pregnant in the kitchen. It has always struck me, always, that they have a lot in common with Islamic fundamentalism...

The Prophet Zechariah, as we should now call him, was looking for his own angle. I don't know if he really believed what he was preaching or not. The human mind is a wonderful labyrinth of double-think...and you can use religion to justify anything. It's wrong to be violent, unless it is in defence of the faith, and if you can convince yourself that what you're doing is in defence of the faith, you can be violent...and so on, and so on. You'll see it all

the time in pretty much every religion. There are always people who use it as an excuse to play their petty little power games.

What Zechariah came up with, according to him, was a sign from God. There would be an apocalypse just after the Rapture, Satan's handiwork intended to prevent the human race from realising just how far it had strayed from the ideal of God's Own Faith – note the capital letters – and converting in time to save themselves. It was a very intolerant faith. Anyone else, Christian, Muslim, Jew, Hindu...hell, the Giant Sheep Faith, was going to be damned and burning in hell. Zechariah foresaw that one day the Rapture would come and he and his people would be left behind on Earth.

You'd think that that wouldn't be very impressive, right? If someone is promising eternal salvation, you'd be more interested in that than being told that you're going to live through seven years of pure hell, suffering all the time. Zechariah, however, was clever. They – the pure, the saved – were under a divine obligation to rebuild the world after the apocalypse and invite Jesus Christ down to his kingdom on Earth. They would be left behind for a purpose. They would serve God in the best way possible, actually making it possible for His son to manifest on Earth.

Remember what I said about the guilt? Zechariah's sermons called to those who believed, deep inside, that they were unworthy of heaven no matter how much they paid and struggled for the faith. (The radicals were under the impression that they were persecuted in America. I don't know why. They should have looked at Saudi for an example of real Christians being persecuted.) The man who lusted after another man's wife, even if he had never touched her, the woman who had wondered what it would be like to make out with another woman, even if she had never given into such temptations, the young boy who looked at porn magazines under his bed...they all felt guilty. Zechariah called them to believe that they would be given this task and they felt less guilty, not least because Zechariah allowed all kinds of things that most religions frowned upon.

Anyway...they started out in California. Now, California is – was – the heart of the alternate lifestyle. I never saw the attraction myself, but you could go there and join a commune, or you could take up with a bunch of witches and declare yourself a sorceress, or...hell, you could do anything. They worshipped all kinds of gods and entities. There was a Church of the Heinlein Followers – thou art God – a Church of the Tin Vagabond, a Garden of the Sacred Goddess and, believe it or not, a Giant Sheep religion. Imagine a faith, any faith, with any kind of rules you like...and I'm pretty sure you won't think of the most outrageous faith out there. We even had a guy from Africa who preached that the only way to cure yourself of AIDS was to have sex with a child, the younger the better.

And why, you might ask, wasn't all of this stopped? Like I said above, America is a land of religious freedom and we have some problems dealing with the concept that a religion might be too threatening to be allowed to exist. There might have been grandiose plans put forward by various people to remove every Muslim from America in the wake of the 9/11 attacks, or simply exterminate them wholesale, but no one would have accepted any such plan. It wasn't easy to move against any religion, or even a much smaller cult, even if there was good reason to believe that they were brainwashing people, or exploiting children. The child molesting cult managed to jam up the legal process for years before he was finally sent to Death Row. We just don't like questioning religion. It's not in our nature to do so.

Zechariah fitted right in, at first. He was articulate, personally charming, and, as I said, he had one hell of a message. He won hundreds of converts in the first months of his stay in San Francisco, something that almost overbalanced the entire apple cart. It was a racket and, as he drew more people to him, more of them wanted a share in the proceeds. They argued with each other – and other similar groups – had a schism into smaller groups, and even had the occasional quiet bloodbath. Zechariah was investigated, twice, for illegal activities, but the convictions always fell through. He might have been an offshoot, but the other pre-millennium faiths closed ranks around him. They couldn't accept anyone trying to dictate to him, or they might be next to have their faiths questioned by the godless Federal Government.

(The important point to understand about these people is that they were not guided by logic and reason. To be a believer, and not a leader, in one of those faiths required you to accept things that logic and reason told you weren't so. Jesus loved everyone, to take, but one example, but he also *apparently* made a special exemption for homosexuals.)

The irony was that when the downfall came, it wasn't through internal dispute or even the government wising up and stamping on the whole fucking lot. The State Government of California was very anti-gun. Heaven forbid that law-abiding citizens should have the means to defend themselves against criminals, murderers and the federal government. Why, they said, without guns, the crime rate in our fair cities would fall like a stone. They cracked down, sent in their police forces to confiscate hundreds of guns...and Zechariah led his core believers away from the city. Their belief that the apocalypse was just around the corner required them to keep their guns – he even worked it into his sermons, claiming that the anti-gun laws were Satan's plot to disarm the believers and foil his holy mission before he could even begin – and so they travelled east to Kentucky. There, they established their base of operations, using the takings from their sermons to fund it. They built an entire fortress there, with enough food to keep them going for years and enough guns to stand off an army. It was, I believe, a source of some major concern to the feds – well, of course – and they were considering doing something about him, but then...

The apocalypse arrived.

It wasn't an asteroid hitting the Earth, or a moment of bad temper on the part of some divine entity, but the nuclear war. You know what happened to us already, along with some other parts of the world, but for Zechariah...it was the Rapture. God had taken the believers – apart from his people, of course – up to heaven and now they had to fight to rebuild God's country. Sources differ on how many people Zechariah actually had under his direct command – and there's nothing like a prophecy coming true to add to religious fervour – but he had the largest organised force in the area. As I had demonstrated myself, mass armies no longer existed, but a few hundred men could dominate the entire area, if they were trained and armed for the task. Zechariah had the weapons, he had the food and, rather unfairly, he had the refugees as well.

We hadn't been able to take in many refugees. Zechariah had enough food stocks and manpower to take in as many people as he wanted...and brainwash them to his particular cause. Whatever sense of restraint he'd had had vanished – remember, he'd been 'proved' right by the war – and he pushed all common decency to one side. The refugees, shocked, starving and in search of somewhere safe, were easy meat. He was a cunning bastard, all right, and a completely ruthless one at that.

The refugees found themselves split up at once. White men went into one place, women went into another, blacks went into a third and Muslims into a fourth. The white men got the best treatment and the best food, but were treated as the very lowest levels of the faithful and forced to prey endlessly, pushed forward into becoming what he wanted them to become. Why not? Their world had betrayed them and many of them were on the brink of despair. Repetition, tiny amounts of food and endless prayer broke them down and built them back up again. They became fanatical believers.

The women received different treatment. Their role in Zechariah's faith, as I said, was that of barefoot and pregnant helpmates to their men. They had to cast their eyes down, never speak to a man without permission and were genuinely treated like dirt. Anyone can be broken if handled properly and Zechariah was a master at manipulating human minds. The handful of declared feminists in the camp who tried to fight back were dragged out and brutally raped in front of the other women. (Rape, too, was permitted in the service of the faith.) Personally, I think that Zechariah was a bit of a misogynist; he'd probably had a bad experience with a female boss or something along the line and, naturally, decided she'd gotten the job because she had sucked her boss's cock, or because she was a woman, or...people like that never look at themselves for blame. They always look at someone else. Once they were broken, the unmarried women were assigned to the various Brethren of the Elite; after all, a woman had to have a man accountable for her. They believed that no woman could be trusted to look after herself.

(By this point, I hope you're feeling rather sick. That's how I felt. They were a disgrace to my country, people who should have been rounded up and dumped somewhere in the middle of the desert, where the vultures could gnaw their bones.)

The blacks, men and women alike, were promptly enslaved. I don't know why Zechariah felt that black men were good only to hew wood and draw water, but he did; they were all enslaved. Resistors received quick and savage punishment. Male resistors were beaten and then killed in front of the rest. Female resistors were beaten and raped violently in front of the other women, all of the women. The resistors ended up being killed off quickly. Most men and women won't fight unless there seems to be a chance of victory and Zechariah offered them none. They believed that they were trapped and helpless. That very belief kept them enslaved.

And, finally, the Muslims. They received the worst treatment. Zechariah's faith had its origins in very muscular Christianity, a version of the faith that saw Islam as a challenge and a deadly threat. The Muslim men were killed, one by one, after being offered the chance to accept Jesus Christ into their lives. The women were raped, of course, and added to the harem. Need I mention, I wonder, that all of the Brethren of the Elite – his inner circle – and the Warriors of the Lord – his fighters, a name that soon became attached to the entire group – had free access to the harem and any black woman at any time? It provided their male followers with an incentive to convert and struggle to gain elite status...and, also, a disinclination to rebel. It's a trick as old as man himself. Once you have blood on your own hands, once you've done something you know to be wrong, you can't go back. You're committed for life.

The poor refugee bastards didn't stand a chance. Their world had shattered around them and they were on the brink of becoming Zombies. In that fragile state, it was easy for Zechariah

and his priests to break them down, men and women alike, and reshape them into their ideal. The men had the incentive of better treatment, promotion and access to slave women. The women had the incentive of being treated kindly – like pets – rather than being raped as punishment for being uppity. The blacks...well, in any hierarchical society, there *has* to be someone at the bottom, serving as a warning to those above them of the price for failing. While we'd been struggling to survive, Zechariah had been building his army for conquest.

He started to expand almost at once. The problem with any kind of pyramid scheme is that it depends on having as many people at the bottom as possible...and, if you're at the bottom, you want to rise higher. Other towns, some of which had been trying to save themselves as we had, found themselves trapped in a tidal wave of fanatics, all determined to gain more subjects and raise themselves within the organisation. They didn't stand a chance, either. The Sword of the Lord, Sword of the Lord Michael as he was called, was a canny leader. I don't know if he were actually a former military officer. It wasn't common for the more extreme militias to have actual military personnel, as opposed to posers, and I would like to think that he wasn't, but he was a good officer. He broke through defence lines, occupied towns, and then the Brethren of the Elite started to convert the town. Once such a scheme got rolling, was there anything that could actually stop it?

It had happened before. Alexander the Great had swept across the world. So too, more practically, had Muhammad. They'd both reshaped entire sections of world history. If Zechariah couldn't be stopped, he might well pick off the remainder of the United States piece by piece, forcing everyone to follow his own version of the faith. An ambitious man, with all the power of thousands of fanatics behind him, make take the entire ball of wax. I doubted that there was an organised force that could stop him left on the planet.

And this was what was coming our way.

It's probably a good thing I didn't know that at the time.

I might have seriously considered accepting the terms they offered us.

Chapter Twenty-Six

*All Faith is false, all Faith is true:
Truth is the shattered mirror strewn,
In myriad bits; while each believes,
His little bit the whole to own.*

-Richard Francis Burton

I nearly burst a gut getting down to the Forward Operating Base, but I didn't feel that I had much choice. I had sent messengers to St. Marys to ask Mac to take one of the Companies of soldiers and come join me, but for the moment I would only have three Companies under my direct command. It didn't help that our definition of 'Company' was somewhat variable. We had Companies composed of over a hundred men and companies that barely had fifty men. It was a compromise that, like all good compromises, satisfied no one.

Dutch Schofield had been Mac's friend a long time before I knew him – if only for a given value of friend – but I'd grown to trust him in the months since we'd met at Clarksburg. He'd organised Salem's defences and had played a major role in organising the new army. He'd once confided in me that he preferred playing soldier to being a farmer, but I didn't hold that against him. No one would have called me a farmer either. It was lucky, as it turned out, that we hadn't placed the FOB in Summersville, West Virginia, itself. Summersville might have been one of the Principle Towns, but it had been lucky to survive with Charleston so near and thousands of refugees pouring out of the remains of the city. The defenders were tough and well-armed, but we'd started keeping the army away from the Principle Towns. It was, again, one of those damn compromises.

The FOB itself had been some city-dwellers idea of a countryside home before it had been taken over by our forces and converted into a base. It was larger than any sane person would want if they lived on their own – and we found no evidence that the nameless owner had ever had a family – but perhaps he used it as a love nest for his affairs. Hell, I don't know; all I know is that it was looted once, but left largely intact and fit for use. The handful of squatters on the estate had been delighted to join up with us. *They* knew almost nothing about taking care of themselves in the wildness.

"Sir," Dutch said, with a very precise salute. Our army didn't have much of a saluting tradition – we hadn't had the time for such things, not when we needed to train them to *fight*, and besides, salutes are dangerous in a combat zone – but Dutch saluted anyway. I think he missed being a soldier. "We have the refugees in the medical centre, sir. They're under guard, but Lucy is taking care of them."

Lucy was one of the nurses from Stonewall, a short black woman, who would have been remarkably pretty were it not for the nasty scar on her nose. A criminal, according to Richard, had once been tied down for treatment, only to carry out a form of social protest by biting her nose off, literally. The bastard had been released only a few months before the Final War on some kind of technicality. Being tied down, apparently, stifled his free expression and therefore he was justified in whatever he did to strike back. Call me old fashioned if you like, but I believe in punishing violent actions against unarmed nurses, or against anyone who didn't deserve it. The meme that blames everything on everyone, but the prisoner, doesn't solve crime at all. You might as well refuse to declare anything a crime and claim, therefore, that you have beaten crime. What sort of nonsense is that?

“I took a look at the recovered bodies,” Lucy said, as Dutch showed me into her emergency ward. It would have horrified me in Iraq to think that I might be treated under such conditions, but now all I could do was approve. It was clean, at least, and that was the best that could be said for it. I hoped she was remembering to boil her tools before using them. “There’s not much on them to identify them – not that it would matter these days – but they were showing signs of having been whipped, some time ago.”

I blinked. “Whipped?”

“Whipped,” Lucy confirmed. “I did a brief spell in a woman’s rescue centre in Detroit, sir, and some of the women there were whipped by their partners. The wounds were similar, although there was something odd about them, almost as if it wasn’t intended to be just a punishment.”

“The Shia Muslims sometimes flagellate themselves,” I said, remembering a ceremony I had watched once in Iraq. It had been oddly moving, in hindsight, but at the time I’d been more worried about suicide bombers and the prospects of outright civil war. There’d also been Uncle Billy’s jokes about what happened to boys who went to British Public Schools. “Could it be something like that?”

“I don’t know,” Lucy said. “The wounds were probably not self-inflicted, but other than that I couldn’t tell you any more about it. They’re both in surprisingly good shape, suggesting regular exercise and good food, but that could mean anything.”

I nodded, looking down at the bodies. They were both in good shape, but that meant very little these days. The real fatties had died off in the collapse following the nuclear bombardment, or had been eaten by cannibal gangs, or had been forced to get into shape. We hadn’t been cruel about it – well, *I* hadn’t been cruel about it – but I wasn’t going to give fatties extra rations just because they were used to eating more before the war. It was amazing how many of them had slimmed down and were now in better shape than they had been in their entire lives.

“And the refugees?”

“They’ve been whipped as well,” Lucy said. “The woman was raped at least once, judging by the wounds in the...ah, affected area.” Her voice darkened as she spoke, losing her clinical objectivity. “They also have signs of having been chained up from time to time, with bruises on their wrists and ankles. They’re not faked, sir. They’re also suffering from malnutrition and are going to be very vulnerable to disease.”

“Ouch,” I said. Kit had been worried, more than anything else, about the spread of disease within our little enclaves. It was why we had instigated a firm policy of regular baths and medical check-ups. There were places, refugees had told us, where Smallpox and the Black Death had broken out and exterminated entire groups. It wasn’t something to take lightly. “Are they healthy?”

She gave me the kind of look you would give to a particularly stupid child. “They’re in the best shape they could be, given their treatment,” she said. “They’re holding themselves

together, somehow, but I suspect that the woman, in particular, is on the verge of complete mental collapse. I suggest that you use care when you interrogate them.”

“I will,” I promised. “Have they been kept together?”

“They have,” Dutch said. “They appear to be related, so...”

We peered in through the window into a small bedroom. It was guarded, but other than that there was little to suggest that it was a prison. There were three people in the room. A black man, wounded but unbowed, a black woman and a white teenager. The woman – she couldn’t have been more than thirty – looked shattered, but the teenager looked determined to fight, if they had to escape. They all looked worn out beyond endurance.

“I’m going in,” I said. “Dutch, stay behind me. I don’t think they will offer any trouble, but keep an eye on them anyway.”

I stepped into the room and instantly they looked up at me. “I’m Colonel Edward Stalker, United States Marine Corps,” I said. If I were pressed, I would have had to admit that I was a retired Marine and that the USMC no longer existed, but it sounded better than anything more accurate. “I understand that you wanted to talk to someone in authority?”

“Yes, sir,” the black man said, coming to his feet and standing to attention, snapping off a salute that was surprisingly impressive, given his condition. I had seen worse salutes from exhausted infantrymen after Fallujah. “Sergeant Samuel Ellsworth reporting for duty, *sir!*”

“At ease,” I said, automatically. The man should have been in hospital, not reporting for duty. “You’re safe now, you and your...wife?” I frowned at the teenager. It was pretty obvious that they were not related. “And your...?”

“Brother-in-law, actually,” Samuel said. “This is Debbie Ellsworth, my wife, and this is Gary Jordan, who married my sister a year ago.”

Gary didn’t look old enough to marry, but perhaps he was older than he looked, and in any case it was none of my business. I listened, briefly, to a discussion of his service in the National Guard – it turned out that he’d been on leave when the war started and hadn’t reported back before the nuclear missiles started to fire, which I thought was a little odd, but never mind – and their terrifying escape from Frankfort in the midst of chaos. The city had been a target and it had been all they could do to escape, taking with them only what they wore on their backs.

“And then we were caught by the Warriors,” Samuel continued. It was the first I’d heard their name, but I would become too familiar with it in the coming months. “They killed Sharon – my sister – and...” – he broke off, helplessly – “and they did other things to us. They turned me into a slave, said that that was all I was fit for, and raped Debbie to prove they could. They nearly broke me and so...”

“I managed to find a way to communicate with them,” Gary said, a new and bitter tone in his voice. “I swallowed their shit and sprouted it back and smiled when they encouraged me to lord it over Samuel. It wasn’t long before we had an escape plan and when they moved us up here to dig ditches and build defences, we took our chance and ran.”

I focused on the important word. “Defences?”

“Oh, yes,” Samuel said. He sounded more like a soldier now he was talking about military affairs. “I told them that I was just a bricklayer; I used to do that just to earn some extra cash and I could pass as one, so they didn’t watch me with particular care. They’re planning to take over everywhere, sir; they kept knocking over towns and adding new slaves to their slave markets. First, it was just brothers, and then it was everyone who displeased them...and anyone who objected was beaten to death. They want everything.”

I winced. Were we facing a new threat, worse than gang-bangers or CORA? “You escaped,” I said, finally. We’d have to pump them for all the information in their heads, no matter how unpleasant it was for them. I always hated doing that when I’d been on deployment. “How did you do that?”

“They got lazy,” Samuel said, a grim note of triumph in his voice. “They kept us chained up and thought that that was enough, but we had a man on the inside. One night, Gary came into the tent, unhooked us, and we fled, leaving the others to rebel or flee as they chose. I didn’t realise that they had tracker dogs, sir; they were on our tail far quicker than we had realised.”

I frowned. “Where did you think you were going?”

Samuel looked at me as if I had gone mad. “Away,” he said. “They were taking out the girls, one by one, and raping them in front of us, just to grind our faces in the dirt. I wanted to die a free man and...I was sure that somewhere out there, there was a working government. If the Marines are here...”

“I’m sorry,” I said, and told them, in general terms, about Ingalls. I didn’t tell them any specifics – I suspected that they weren’t spies, but what they knew they could be forced to tell others – but I let them know the outline. “It’s just us, sorry.”

“You’d better get ready to defend yourself,” Gary said, with quiet vehemence. “I was listening to them ranting and raving all the time, convincing everyone that they had to follow them and march onwards to glory. They’re going to be coming for you next.”

“I see,” I said, grimly. I believed them. The possibility of post-war movements seeking permanent change had always been part of my work on nuclear war and other post-apocalypse scenarios. If half of what they said was true, the Warriors of the Lord would hardly be content with leaving us alone. They’d be coming for us in their multitudes and lay waste to our lands. “We’ll do our best to defend ourselves.”

I left the room. “Keep them under observation,” I ordered, “but treat them well.”

“Yes, sir,” Dutch said, gravely. “Do you believe all that they said?”

“I think that we can’t take the chance,” I said. Intelligence work isn’t as easy as it seems in the movies. Intelligence agencies, far from being all-seeing, rarely see even half of the entire picture and, sometimes, make mistakes. Normally, when that happens, it is seen as a sign of criminal intent. “I want you to push our pickets and wait for reinforcements. Once we have some additional forces here...”

Naturally, my orders were already out of date.

“Sir,” a guard called, “there is a horseman at the gate demanding to speak to the person in charge.”

“I’ll see him,” I decided, and allowed Dutch to lead me out of the building and back onto the estate. The lone horseman was wearing a strange mixture of gear, some of it seemingly medieval, while other parts were definitely modern. The body armour he was wearing had probably come out of a police armoury or maybe even a security firm’s office, but I doubted that it had carried a red Christian cross symbol when it had been new. It wasn’t the sign of the International Red Cross, but something far more ominous.

He glared at me, trying to be intimidating. I could see how he would be intimidating to anyone without real experience. He was strong, either through heavy exercise or steroids, and looked it. He wore a tight goatee, black armour with the red symbol, and carried a modern M16 rifle, a whip and a long broadsword. The effect was that of a barbarian out of a story where the laws of physics had changed remarkably.

Oh, and he stank. It wasn’t just the horse, which was looking faintly bored with the entire situation, but of something else, rather less pleasant. I didn’t know what it was, but it was more than just refusing to wash every so often. He kept trying to give me the eye, but I knew that there were a dozen rifles trained on him from hidden positions. If he drew that sword – which made a certain kind of sense, given how sparse ammunition had become – he was a dead man. That body armour wouldn’t stop hunting rifles.

“You in charge here?” He finally thundered. It was the voice of a man used to getting his own way at all times and hang the consequences to everyone else. I guessed he was one of nature’s bullies, like Moe or others I would have preferred to forget. A single punch in his gut would feel very good, I decided. “I have a message for you and Ingalls from the Sword of the Lord.”

My eyes narrowed. How had he known I came from Ingalls, or that Ingalls was serving as the centre for the Constitutional Convention? Logically, they’d been aware of us longer than we’d been aware of them; they might even have slipped in a few spies along the way. It wasn’t as if it was easy, now, to check someone’s bona fides.

Worse, they knew where the FOB was. What would they do with the information?

“You can give your message to me,” I said, finally. I was tempted to take him prisoner and find out what he knew, if anything, but a muscle-bound brute like that was probably rated as expendable by his superiors. Why else would he be sent here, where he might be killed out of hand? “What do you want?”

He opened a saddlebag and pulled out a sheet of paper, wrapped in an envelope. It was curiously fitting, in a way, even though it looked odd being held by a man on horseback. The Warriors of the Lord, we learned later, had kept dozens of horses in stables as a breeding program for their post-disaster nightmares. It was a cunning move on their part and one that had paid off handsomely. If the demon technology had been destroyed or crippled, horses would be worth twice their weight in gold.

“This is the message from the Prophet Zechariah, the bearer of glad tidings of the word of the Lord and His Son Jesus Christ,” the man intoned. It almost laughed. It would have been deadly funny if it hadn’t been so apparent that he meant every word. “You will take it to your nest of sin and harlots and inform them of the choice facing them. We are coming and the wrath of the Lord will melt your resistance like water.”

With that, he slapped the horse, turned around, and cantered off into the distance.

“Bastard,” I said, with feeling as I read the letter. “Dutch, I’m going back to Ingalls with this and the refugees. While I’m gone, keep on high alert and resist any attack, understand?”

“Yes, sir,” Dutch said. “What do they want?”

“Oh, nothing very much,” I said, icily. The anger was still burning within my breast. I wanted something to kill. “Just everything we have and if we worship them, we even get to keep our lives. How generous these people are, to be sure.”

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Democratic decision making is a means for finding and implementing the will of the majority; it has no other function. It serves, not to encourage diversity, but to prevent it.

-David Friedman

There are times when I think that granting the franchise to every American citizen was a bad idea. As a case in point, try the Constitutional Convention. I had left them to attend to the report of contact with the Warriors of the Lord, debating angrily over who should have the right to vote. When I got back, with the three refugees in tow, I found that they were *still* arguing over it...and didn't look as if they had come to any kind of compromise. It was strange, in a way; they'd ensured that democracy would continue to govern America – as long as the Warriors were defeated – but they were now arguing over who had the right to vote.

Oh, I could see both sides of their argument, something that hasn't always worked in my favour. Suppose you gave an unrestricted franchise to everyone over the age of sixteen, or eighteen, or twenty-one. The vote would go to the smart or politically-aware, those who bothered to actually think about the issues, and also to those who would vote for a candidate with a nice smile, or because of his stance on [insert your favoured Cause of the Month here] or because of what was effectively a bribe. I remember one of our politicians, before the Final War, promising every citizen an 'above average' income. You'd think that such a loser would...well, lose, but instead he had a steady support base and a permanent seat in Congress. How could anyone believe that everyone could have an above average income? The average would continue to rise, knocking businesses and corporations out of business, until the entire economy collapsed.

You see, a political machine depends on harvesting votes from voters. The politicians promise the Earth in exchange for votes, which really means that as long as the voters get what they want, they won't change sides and vote for the other guy. That can have perverse results, from time to time, and sometimes downright dangerous ones. Politics became, not about making decisions, but avoiding them. The Congressmen and Senators tried to be all things to all men...and, naturally, failed. They couldn't just please one group, could they? They'd trapped themselves by their own words. They even passed dangerous and short-sighted legislation because they believed that it was what the people wanted. The Constitutional Convention wanted to prevent that from happening ever again.

And what about the exact opposite? What if we restricted the franchise? Even if we accepted that as a principle of government, how could we decide who got to vote and who didn't? Take an American citizen – take a citizen from anywhere on Earth – and ask him who should get a vote and I bet you twenty dollars (post-war currency) that he will say that *he* should get a vote, and that he'll also have a long list of people who shouldn't have a vote. It got worse, of course; without a vote, people would feel as if they had no stake in society. Why had we broken away from Britain in the first place? No taxation without representation, hey?

The arguments were growing more and more poisonous. Most of the representatives were farmers or military veterans, or both. They wanted some guarantees against the steady growth of Washington's power – never mind that Washington was probably a radioactive pile of rubble – and the stupid laws that had been driving many of them out of business. They

wanted to restrict the franchise, then allocate it, then divide it up depending upon permanent homes...I couldn't follow all of the arguments and I had no wish to try. One man, who shall remain nameless, seriously proposed disenfranchising everyone who hadn't been born in one of the Principle Towns. A second person, another man, insisted that a woman should be disenfranchised until she had produced at least four children. The only idea that was gaining traction was the concept – stolen from *Starship Troopers* – of granting the franchise to men and women who had served in the military, even though there weren't many of the latter.

Look, I like Robert A. Heinlein as much as the next man. *Starship Troopers* was required reading at Boot Camp – the film was sometimes required watching as well, but we were called upon to critique it as savagely as possible – but I could see one major flaw with the overall arrangement. It seems clear, to me, that the hero's father hadn't been a voter himself...despite owning a successful business and paying taxes. Why should he had paid taxes without representation? Worse – if that wasn't bad enough – a man who had built a business was no unskilled teenager to be turned into a military officer and sent out to be shot at. (The purpose of war, by the way, is not to die for your country, but to make the other guy die for his.) The world of *Starship Troopers* made a deeply flawed use of manpower.

That, in short, was the environment into which I brought the news of the Warriors. Historically, I am reminded of the Congress of Vienna, which was still in session when Napoleon Bonaparte escaped from Elba. United, they issued orders in joint session, rather than being separated and forced to waste time reuniting. I'd like to say that the Constitutional Convention reacted to the threat in a quick and precise manner, but I'd be lying. They had the bit in their teeth and were unwilling to be distracted by anything so many as a horde of religious fanatics sweeping across the land like locusts towards them.

Luckily, I had Ben-David's help.

"We must show the voters that we can act as a proper government," he said, after having blown a trumpet loud enough to silence the chatter. The delegates watched with a vague undertone of mass rebellion. I had to admire Ben-David's pluck. I'd seen insurgents in Iraq who looked less threatening and the representatives could probably shoot straighter. "I call upon you all to listen to the Colonel's important briefing."

I'd actually spread the word about the Warriors when I'd received the first message, but why worry about that when we were on the verge of war. "Gentlemen, I will be brief," I said, and I was as good as my word. I outlined what had happened since I had left Ingalls to tend to the report from Dutch and the FOB, what I had learned from the refugees, and finally the message from the Warriors themselves. "We are faced with a choice between war or slavery."

"This may be nothing more than an exaggeration," Reverend Thomas McNab thundered, afterwards. I might have painted Christianity with a broader brush than I had intended. The Reverend didn't look too happy. "They might only be a Christian mission out to reform the land. Just because they're religious doesn't mean that they're the bad guys, does it?"

I said nothing. I'd seen this kind of evasion before, from Muslims who would have preferred to forget that the more radical factions existed. The Christian mainline would have preferred to forget that the fringe, with its embarrassing series of politically incorrect views on everything from homosexuals to abortion, existed. I would have preferred to forget it myself;

after all, if people wanted to worship in any manner they liked...well, why not? As long as no one else was hurt...

But they would be hurt. Normally, the fringe movements were all talk and very little action. After all, they were embarrassing enough that they were regularly disowned by the mainliners and generally confined themselves to peaceful protests and the occasional spat over the issue of the day. Now, however, law and order had broken down completely and someone who wanted to make their mark on the land could take it much further than possible before. The police were gone, the army and National Guard were effectively gone – or broken up and scattered – and the government had been destroyed. The Warriors of the Lord might come to dominate the entire east coast of America...if we couldn't stop them.

"I don't think that we can take that on trust," I said. I hesitated. I hadn't wanted to introduce Samuel, let alone his wife and brother-in-law, to the gathering, but there was no choice. "I brought one of the refugees to testify in front of you."

Samuel started, as I advised, with his headlong flight from the city and how they'd been captured by the Warriors of the Lord. We'd had had time to go through his story with the help of Jackson and a couple of others who had had experience interrogating cooperative suspected and we'd built up a much better picture of the Warriors of the Lord than we had realised. Samuel talked about how he'd been taken as a slave, beaten repeatedly – he showed off his scars, including a nasty one near his groin, to the gathering – and how the others had been treated. The story of their escape he saved for last, but he was careful to make it clear that without Dutch's arrival, they would have been recaptured...and, like other runaway slaves, beaten to death.

"I think he made an impression," Ben-David muttered, using one hand to cover his face as he spoke to me. A handful of delegates had been sick. Several others, including a number of women and black faces, looked as if they were going to be sick themselves, or consumed with rage. The majority of black men and women who lived out near Ingalls or the other Principle Towns, or had made it out of the dying cities, had developed new lives for themselves. The threat of being turned into slaves again, the black man's nightmare, had concentrated more than a few minds. "Ed, can we stop them?"

"I don't know," I admitted, cursing the timing under my breath. I should have had Mac back here in Ingalls, supervising the defence plans...and thank God we had been building up the defences, rather than letting them fall idle now that we had a growing community again. If the Warriors had held off their appearance for a year – assuming we survived the coming winter – we would have been in a far worse state to face them. "We don't know enough about how many of them there are, or how well they're armed."

I'd been mulling that over ever since the first warning, but there was no way to know until we faced them in combat. It was amazing just how many weapons there were in America, legal and illegal, despite all the petty restrictions. The Warriors of the Lord, even if they had stuck to legal weapons, could have amassed quite an arsenal, and if they had gone for illegal weapons as well – or raided an arsenal – they could have everything from mortars to artillery. They might even have poison gas. It wasn't *that* hard to make something that could be used against an unprepared opponent. We really needed intelligence, but they hadn't given Samuel a guided tour of their fighters...

“I’m going to send Biggles down south to see what he can see,” I said. The Warriors might not have any aircraft, although a careful search might turn up other craft that had survived the EMP largely intact. They might have antiaircraft weapons as well; there had been some antiaircraft missiles in National Guard armouries, including the basic Stinger missile. They’d been distributed as a last ditch defence against another 9/11, or something like that, but if the Warriors had them...I’d just have to warn him to be careful. “I need to show this lot the document they sent us.”

I’d read it carefully while in the truck on the way back to Ingalls. It made frightening reading, not least because of the casual lack of security-awareness in the text...and my own worries over just what kind of opponent we were facing. We were facing an idiot, someone without the imagination to know what we would be able to deduce from the text, or a dispassionate genius who intended me to deduce everything...and take it as a warning. The Warriors of the Lord, it was evident, knew far more about us than was comfortable, right down to the location of all of the Principle Towns. They’d pushed at St. Marys and had been repulsed, or so I had deduced, but they’d clearly been spying on us for a while. It wasn’t as if we had the resources to comb every last possible hiding place in West Virginia and, with a little care, thousands of spies could have remained undiscovered indefinitely. Hell, for all I knew, they even had people inside the towns...

You’d never believe it, but I don’t like speaking in public. I would almost sooner prefer to walk back into the hellfire of Fallujah stark naked than face a crowd of people hanging on my every word, let alone a crowd of people who would prefer to believe that I was wrong and no such threat existed. I don’t know if that is a flaw integral to democracies or not, but very few democracies have ever worked to deal with a problem before it became a major threat. Democracies do not go eagerly to war...

“This is the message they sent us,” I said, and spelled out some of the implications. They weren’t stupid, after all. They had some practical experience of life, rather than theory or ideology. “I think that it spells out just what they have in mind to us.

“To the residents of West Virginia, we bring you greetings and salutations in the name of Jesus Christ, Son of God Almighty, and the Prophet Zechariah as his messenger on Earth,” I read. There were more greetings and salutations and so I skipped through them with the promise that the entire message would be displayed in public at the Town Hall. “We thank you for your service before God in preparing West Virginia to receive the True Word of God and hereby inform you that your duties are at an end. The Servants of God have arrived to carry out the will of the Lord Himself and his chosen ones.”

I paused, swallowing down the urge to vomit. “We wish to inform you that we will take into our care, in stewardship for the Lord God and His Son, the lands of West Virginia which you have kept in trust for us. We bid you welcome to the faith, but be warned that unbelievers, dissidents and servants of Satan will not be permitted within our lands. If you refuse to accept the True Faith, you may make a choice. We will hold you to that choice.

“First, you may leave, taking with you only what you can carry and leaving behind you all weapons, vehicles, technological supplies and seeds for later planting,” I continued. “If you attempt to return to our lands or take more than we permit you to take, we will kill you in the name of the True Faith, as ones who have attempted to impede its progress across the land.

“Second, you may accept punishment for your sin. We will purify you of your sin and cleanse you that you may face the Lord your God with a clear soul. If you face us voluntarily, it will be our joy to perform the act to scourge you of your sin.”

“I saw someone poor bastard gong through such a ceremony,” Samuel said, into the dead silence. “They whipped him until they had stripped the flesh off his bones, then they drowned him in a pond and buried him with full honours. They’re crazy fucks, sir, dead crazy.”

“Finally, you may fight,” I continued. “If you take up arms against the Warriors of the Lord, servants of the Lord God and His Son Jesus Christ” – I was getting sick of reading that time and time again – “we will grind you into the dirt and crush any who dare to resist, enslaving those who survive the just wrath of God so that they may serve us for the remainder of their days. You will melt in the face of the terrible wrath of God Himself.

“For those of you who wish to join us, and will accept us willingly into their hearts, we will arrive soon and welcome you into the True Faith,” I concluded, as I read the final lines. “You will be welcome, all will be welcome, to rebuild one nation under God.”

“The man’s mad,” someone muttered, loudly enough to be heard. I rather agreed. It sounded like the ravings of a madman, rather than anything more rational. I wasn't going to surrender to the Warriors of the Lord in a hurry...and leaving as they suggested would be a ticket to a slow death. It was obvious to me that they wanted nothing less than the entire ball game. They might even get it too.

“The man is insane,” Reverend Thomas McNab agreed. He had something else to lose. The Warriors had been slaughtering all other religious leaders wherever they found them. How could anyone preach the true word of Christ if those who knew the words were all dead? “Ed – Colonel – please accept my apologies.”

“I understand,” I said.

Ben-David posed the question. “Do we fight, surrender, or run?”

The vote was quickly taken. ‘Fight’ won by a large majority.

“Thank you,” I said, grimly. The outrage would wear off quickly, although there were entire groups of the population that were doomed if the Warriors took over. Rose’s plans to create entire groups of female militiamen would be doomed from the start. She’d probably wind up being raped and killed as a witch. “With your support, I know that we will win this war.”

I wish I’d been as confident as I sounded. This wasn't going to be pleasant.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

“Igitur qui desiderat pacem, praeparet bellum.” (“If you want peace prepare for war.”)
-Vegetius

The next few days passed in a blur. Once the vote had been taken, the Constitutional Convention agreed to support the war effort and prepare to resist the Warriors of the Lord when they finally decided to attack us. The message had mentioned a week’s grace before they decided that we weren’t going to bend over and drop our pants for them, but I wasn’t too sure that they would stick to their word. A force that believes that they have God on their side and, furthermore, that He will forgive them anything they do in His name is inherently untrustworthy – after all, promises to unbelievers have no validity. I’d seen that before, although not often in America; a person who would never dream of cheating his friends and relatives who also had no hesitation in cheating anyone else. I expected the hammer to fall fairly quickly; after all, if they had spies in Ingalls, they would know that we had rejected their terms.

“I took a platoon out for a patrol, but found nothing,” Brent told me, three days after the Constitutional Convention had declared war. It was probably the first declaration of war in America’s history since the Second World War, but the Warriors might not have known that we had made it. Or perhaps they did; their message, after all, had shown just how much they knew about us. The paranoia was getting to me. Who, just who, would betray us to them? What sort of person would betray Ingalls to the Warriors of the Lord? “If they’re watching us, they’re well back from the defences.”

I didn’t have the heart to tell him that a Force Recon Marine – or someone from one of the other Special Forces units – could be watching us from a shelter and remain completely undetected, except through sheer luck. I’d actually sent a handful of people who *did* have Special Forces experience out to look, putting themselves in the shoes of the enemy, but they’d found nothing as well. I hadn’t expected either search party to find anything, unless the watchers panicked when the searchers came close, but I had had to make the effort. I didn’t know whom to trust, now, apart from Mac and that was dangerous. What if someone in the inner circle was spying for the Warriors? What if no one was spying for them, but I allowed the belief that someone *was* spying for them to blind me...?

“They’re not going to get a mass force close to Ingalls without being detected,” I agreed, studying the map thoughtfully. We had more working radios now and an entire group of pickets scattered around the territory we had cleared, slowly and carefully, of bandits and survivalists. They might manage to move a few people into the area without us noticing, but an entire army? They would be seen miles away and we’d have enough warning to prepare. “Of course, are they going to know that as well?”

“Probably,” Mac said, as he appeared behind us. He looked tired, but surprisingly happy. He’d been supervising the improved defence works surrounding the town using the new labour from the remains of CORA, along with the original prisoners and had been inventing newer and deadlier tricks. “The guy in charge might be a complete loony, but that doesn’t mean that all of his people are loonies as well. They might just decide to come hammering up the interstate towards us, knocking out the pickets and other towns along the way.”

I nodded, stroking my chin as I thought. The real danger was that all the Principle Towns – and the other settlements – were out of support range of each other, despite the radios and the more primitive communication links. If the enemy were smart – and we couldn't assume that they were idiots – they would deploy forces to trap us in our towns and wait until we starved or made a sally out to fight. I wished, not for the first time, that I had better data on just how well organised the Warriors of the Lord actually were. How many people did they have under their banner?

The map of Kentucky actually made me wince inwardly; it was an old-style map, from before the war. It was effectively 'here there be dragons' territory now – we didn't even know how far west the Warriors' influence spread – but it represented a terrifying set of possibilities. Kentucky had had a heavy pre-war population and quite a lot of them could have survived. Fork Knox and a few dozen other targets might have been hit during the war – there had been a National Command Centre in Kentucky, if I recalled correctly – but there would still have been millions of refugees. The Warriors might number in the millions...

"I doubt it would be that bad," Mac said, when I outlined my reasoning. "I can't see everyone going along with them, Ed, and there would certainly be millions of deaths in the weeks following the war, just as there were here. I doubt that the Warriors have more than a few hundred thousand effectives at most."

"I hope you're right," I said, glumly. Biggles had been flying recon missions deeper and deeper into territory controlled – we suspected – by the Warriors, but results had been inconclusive. I would have sold my left arm for proper photoreconnaissance, but we'd have to make do with what we had, even if what Biggles was seeing didn't look very alarming. If it hadn't been for the wounds on the refugees, I might have wondered if we'd stumbled into a phoney war with a phoney enemy. "Are you going to be coming with me to the FOB?"

"I wouldn't miss it for the world," Mac assured me, cheerfully. "We've got four companies forming up at Clarksburg now, so I take it you'll be taking them down with you?"

I nodded. Four companies; roughly three hundred and fifty men between them, a terrifyingly small number. Once added to the Companies already waiting down near Summersville under Dutch's command, we would have around seven hundred men, not counting the defenders of Summersville itself. It sounded laughable to me – the entire 1st Marine Division had had twenty *thousand* men – but it was all we would have. I couldn't draw off every able-bodied man to the war front or the entire recovery effort would collapse. Far too often, as I have probably mentioned a hundred times before, the guy keeping a group together would be a vet, or the guy with the knowledge would be a vet...and they couldn't be spared.

"Yes," I said, grimly. "I'm going to the hospital now. Coming?"

I couldn't spare Kit either, I knew, but events had played a sick joke on all of us. The army needed medical support desperately – it's astonishing what you can live through, provided you get medical support in time, as I was a living example – but most of the trained medics we had were girls. Three of them had been at Stonewall and had served in dangerous environments before, but the others had barely even left Ingalls, where it was safe. How could we risk sending them out, I wondered, and even then I knew that we had no choice. They were going to be needed.

The line of ten girls, three of them rather hard-bitten, the remaining seven nervous and excited, formed up in front of us as we arrived. They all looked far too young to be put into danger and I felt my heart twist, screaming at me to not even consider taking them out of Ingalls. There had been female medics, even soldiers, in Iraq, but they'd been far less important than each and every breeder in Ingalls. I knew it was a mistake, not least because we couldn't provide enough security to guarantee their security, but I had no choice. At least – and I'll be honest here – it was what I told myself.

"This isn't a game," I said, by way of introduction. I probably sounded as if I was being condensing, talking down to them, but I wanted to get the truth across to them. They were young, young enough – like young men, like I had back when I had been young – to believe that they were invincible, indestructible. Bad things didn't happen to them, right? "You've heard the tales from the refugees, particularly the girl. You know what could happen to you if you fall into their hands. You have the best fighting training that we could give you, and yet you're completely inexperienced in a real fight. I wouldn't take you along if I had a choice, or I'd have you surrounded by a hundred heavily-armed men. I can't do either."

I looked from girl to girl. "If you want to back out now, say so," I said. "I won't hold it against you and nor will anyone else. If not, report to the convoy tomorrow morning and prepare to depart with the remainder of the force. Remember, you have weapons and you are authorised to open fire, but your best defence might be your training. I won't order you to cooperate with them, but...you can't serve your town dead. Remember that."

"That was inspiring, sir," Mac said, as we walked away. I hoped he was being snide, even though I would have liked to believe that he meant it. I had wanted to scare the girls. The Warriors used rape as a tool to force women to do as they wished and, even though the girls were nurses and therefore incredibly valuable, they might face the same fate. I could just see some fanatic deciding that the nurses had to be raped to force them to comply with their crazy rules. "I dare say that none of them will show up for the convoy tomorrow."

"Shut up," I said, without heat. He chuckled and slapped my shoulder. "I do have a post in accounting and logistics for you, if you don't behave."

"I'll be good," Mac promised. I laughed at the mock cringing in his tone. He spotted someone in the distance. "Hey, I believe that Richard wants a word."

I hadn't seen Richard in a few weeks, but I had to admit that he and the prison guards looked surprisingly good, despite their condition. They divided their time between defending the prison – which was being converted into a fortress, although depending on the weapons the Warriors had, it might be less useful than I had hoped – and supervising the prisoners. They had adapted well to living in Ingalls and most of them had picked up a girl in a semi-permanent relationship. It seemed to be spreading everywhere these days, even with the threat of mutant children or spontaneous miscarriages. I guess people just want to feel human again.

"Hi, boss," Richard said, cheerfully enough. He was growing a massive bushy beard, of the kind that would have been Officially Unwelcome back before the war, but otherwise he hadn't changed much. His reputation for poisoning the convicts helped keep the remaining prisoners in line, even though it had been my idea. I didn't mind that much. I would have preferred to forget that entire incident. "Ben wants to talk to you."

I followed his pointing finger and lifted an eyebrow. Ben had been one of the borderline cases, a man who had murdered his wife when he had caught her in bed with another man. The prison psychologist had figured that he would never kill again, but he had been midway through his sentence when the Final War extended it indefinitely. He was a tough-looking man, a trucker in a previous life, and Richard had decided to keep him alive. I wasn't sure that I agreed with his judgement – I have little pity for a man who murders his wife, regardless of the circumstances – but so far he'd been a model prisoner. The cynical part of my mind suggested that the chains shackling his legs might have had something to do with that.

“He does?” I asked, puzzled. Richard nodded in agreement. “Very well. Call him over here and we'll talk.”

Up close, Ben looked surprisingly respectable, almost like a Marine. “Sheriff,” he said, bowing his head. He obviously hadn't heard of my promotion to Colonel. I had hoped to keep news of the war from the prisoners, least some of them see opportunity in chaos and rebel. The worst threat to any society always came from its discontented minority. “I was hoping to have a word with you on a subject of mutual interest.”

I quirked an eyebrow, inviting him to continue, which he did. “I confess that I didn't believe you at first when you told us about the war,” he said. “I thought that you were just playing a power game of your own or something. I didn't believe you until you started adding prisoners from the surrounding area to the work gangs.”

“I didn't kill over a thousand of the most evil sons of bitches in the world for shits and giggles,” I snapped, impatiently. I'm a pretty direct man, as my ex-girlfriends would probably testify. “What do you want?”

Ben frowned. “What will happen to us after the five years are over?” He asked. “We're not going to be welcome in Ingalls, are we? If we're not part of a community, not now that there's no social support or anything, what's going to become of us? Are we going to be doomed to living forever on the fringes of society?”

He leaned forward. “You see, we don't get anything out of this,” he said, so quietly that it was almost a whisper. “We're doing everything from digging latrines to building defences against the outside world, but what's in it for us? Oh, we're alive, and you could have us killed at any moment, but you can't expect us to be enthusiastic about it. What do we get out of it?”

I considered it for a moment. “You are here because you owe society a debt and you are going to pay it off,” I said. “I could say that what happens to you afterwards is not my problem, but...I suppose you have a solution?”

Ben nodded. “Most of the remaining prisoners are people like me, who won't kill again,” he said. I gave him points for not trying for the sympathy vote. I wouldn't have been willing to talk to a man who claimed that killing his wife had been right, even if she had cheated on him. “We could be valuable members of society if you gave us a chance.”

“I suppose,” I said, carefully. I recognised a bargaining position when I heard one. I just wanted to know what he had to offer. “What do you want to offer us?”

“We want to build a stake of our own in society,” Ben said. “If you have...say, a couple of dozen of us working on our own farm, or manufacturing plant, or even fighting for you, the remainder of us will work to the best of our ability, rather than doing as little as we can get away with doing.”

“I assume you’d want to rotate the people on the outside,” I said, thoughtfully. I wasn’t going to trust them with weapons, not yet. They would make great fifth columnists for the Warriors. “I’ll think about it and discuss it with the Mayor and the others.”

“Please think quickly,” Ben said. “The longer we just do as little as we can, the less time we’ll have to do what you want us to do.”

I laughed. “Very well,” I said. “I’ll get back to you as soon as I can.”

That night, I discussed it with Rose. “That’s what they want,” I concluded. “Is it worth making the agreement with them?”

Rose thought about it. We’d already argued over her exclusion from the military deployment, but I needed at least two of the deputies back in Ingalls. If you believe that it was a mere coincidence that it was Rose and Deborah who stayed, I have some bottom land in Florida I’d like to sell you. Rose was a good shot, as I would be the first to admit, but she couldn’t go into combat. I was nervous enough about taking the nurses.

“It might be worth integrating them into society,” she said, finally, “but who would trust them that far?”

I nodded. I didn’t want to see the prisoners attacked at once, or treated as the usual suspects, even though both were likely. It would be simple enough to develop one of the wrecked towns – redevelop it, I should say – as a home for them, but it would take a lot of work. It was also something that would have to be done after the war had concluded, along with a million other ideas for grinding out a new tech base and rebuilding the United States.

“Good point,” I said, finally, and reached for her. She leaned back at first, teasing me, and then came into my arms. “Come here...”

I’ll draw a curtain over *that* part of the story, thank you, and take you straight to the meeting the following morning. We had considered marching the entire force straight to the FOB, but considering that deploying there was a matter of urgency, we decided to use trucks instead. They’d been adapted to run on ethanol instead of gasoline, which probably meant that their useful lives had been shortened considerably, but we had little choice. I was reviewing the Companies and thinking how badly my old Drill Sergeant would have taken their appearance – we didn’t have a uniform yet, let alone a standardized kit – when the news arrived.

The Warriors of the Lord, as I had expected, had kicked off the offensive two days ahead of schedule. Their first blow had been precise and carefully planned.

Summersville had fallen to the enemy.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

The war was bound to be merciless. Wars that begin with sneak attacks always are.

-Robert A. Heinlein

I should have had Sheriff Emerson removed from his position.

He wasn't a bad person, not really. He was pretty much a basic small-town cop. He was slightly overweight, wore a massive pair of spectacles and was generally adored by all and sundry. I used to think of him as a slightly more benevolent version of Chief Clancy Wiggum; he wasn't corrupt, he wasn't incompetent and he wasn't a stooge for the evil owner of a nuclear power plant company. What he was, unfortunately, was a man with a tendency to get complacent. He'd served as a Military Policeman during his stint in the Army, but he had never been closer to a combat front than a few miles and had never seen a shot fired in anger. He had had a very uneventful career.

Summersville should have been a hard place to take. The terrain favoured the defenders, who were armed to the teeth, with hundreds of people in the area who owned guns and were experienced in their use. They'd managed to keep the tidal waves of refugees from the cities out, mainly through blockades and the occasional gun battle, and had survived the first isolated months reasonably well. They'd joined up with us when we made First Contact with them and were the first to hear, for all the good it did them, about the Warriors. I hid nothing from them. They had copies of the transcripts from the interrogations and the brief autopsies in their hands. They should have been prepared for an attack.

And then the Warriors took the town.

We didn't realise just what had happened until a few days afterwards, when we found dozens of refugees fleeing the town; dozens, out of a population in the thousands. The Warriors had taken advantage of their complacency and their desperate need for manpower, and had done it in a way that utterly swamped the defenders. They knew us far better than we knew them...and it showed. Whoever was in command on the other side, I reluctantly had to admit, was no slouch.

A week ago, a group of refugees, mainly men with a handful of women, had presented themselves at Summersville, claiming to be refugees from the Warriors of the Lord and their slave camps. You can imagine the group as it waited fearfully outside the barriers; thirty black men, whipped and bleeding, fifty white men, their eyes haunted with shadows, and thirty-two women, broken by all they had experienced the end of the war. Their leader, a tall black man who had been forced to carry a heavy bag everywhere to teach him a lesson, told Summersville that they had fled the Warriors and desperately required shelter and asylum. The townspeople let them into the town.

It should have been obvious from the start, but Summersville – like everywhere else – was suffering from a shortage of manpower. The irony was painfully amusing, in a sense; five months ago, we'd all been killing refugees just to keep them away from the vital food supplies we needed to keep us alive until we could grow more crops and rebuild our farming industry. Now, we needed everyone we could get and the Warriors took advantage of that. The refugees, unarmed and seemingly harmless, were welcomed into the town.

You've probably guessed the punch line by now; Trojan Horse. For those of you who don't read history, one side in the Trojan War decided to build a massive wooden horse as a 'gift' to the defenders of Troy, in hopes of breaking the siege. Once they had completed the horse, they seemingly left, leaving the enemy to take the horse into their city for the night. Unfortunately for them, it was concealing an armed force that killed the defenders and took the city. You can look the rest of the details up in a history book, but the net result of this particular use of the idea was fifty men inside Summersville's defence perimeter.

Fifty men? Yes. It turned out, afterwards, that the blacks had been genuine slaves, as had the women who'd come with them...and they thought that the escape plan had been their idea. They'd been taken from their slave quarters, paired up with resentful workers from another captured town – or so it seemed – and had been offered the opportunity to escape in the direction of Summersville. The news of the contact between the Warriors and us – and the safe escape of three of their slaves – had spread through the remaining slaves and they'd taken the chance when they'd seen it, allied with the women and the resentful workers. They thought that they were safe in Summersville...

They couldn't have been more wrong.

You see, there is a perception – a very popular perception – that an armed man is dangerous and an unarmed man is effectively helpless. It's complete nonsense, of course. There would be much less fuss over gun control if everyone with a gun knew how to use it perfectly, but plenty of people go out and buy a gun without any training, or even previous firearms experience. They're not much more dangerous than any street tough armed with a club. A trained Special Forces soldier, pushed through the most rigorous – and seemingly sadistic – training program that experience and money can buy, is a living weapon. His external weapons are mere afterthoughts. In hand-to-hand combat, I would bet on an unarmed SEAL or a Delta Force commando against almost anyone, even a bunch of armed terrorists. Those men are that deadly. The Warriors of the Lord didn't have that much training – they didn't even have the bare bones of such training – but they had a plan, the advantage of surprise and sheer fanatical determination. You can get quite a long way with the right combination of the three.

Nothing happened for a day, until nightfall, when the Trojan Horsemen (sorry, but I couldn't resist) broke out of their temporary lodgings and assembled in the town, moving from shadow to shadow under cover of darkness. It would never have worked in the old days, but now it wasn't so easy to light up an entire town, even with streetlights. We just couldn't afford to waste the power, or, for that matter, create a glow that would be seen for miles in the dark. The odds were good that that would have led the Warriors right towards us. (It probably didn't matter, as they seemed to know everything anyway, but it sounded better than not having the power to run the lights.) They'd already located and studied their targets and, moving quickly, attacked the armoury and the main police station, followed rapidly by the Town Hall. The first place they hit, the armoury, was lightly guarded – another display of complacency and a far less forgivable one – and they dispatched the guards with ease. By the time the first body was found, and the alarm raised, they had armed themselves and started the second part of their plan. They spread out and started to dismantle the inner centre of Summersville, piece by piece. The Mayor and the remainder of the town's governors died in the first hour of their offensive.

By then, of course, everyone knew what was going on...but it was too late. The population might have had guns – lots of guns – but they were scattered, a hopelessly unformed mass rather than competent and disciplined soldiers. The guards at the barricades were concentrated and ready to act, but as the shooting spread through the town, they were attacked themselves...from the outside. The Warriors had timed their assault well and, just as their insurgents launched their offensive on the inside, the army outside launched its own offensive. They'd managed to get very – very – close without being seen and the defenders found themselves caught between two fires. The defences started to crumble as they found themselves being forced back.

It might still have gone the other way, were it not for the remaining insurgents, who took explosives and stolen uniforms – taken off the killed guards from their first targets – and went to ‘help’ the defenders. In all the confusion, no one took a close look at the newcomers until it was too late and by then...well, it was far too late. The fanatics threw explosive charges into bunkers, touched off mines prematurely and generally wrecked an entire section of defences. The army came through the breach and...well, Katie bar the door. It almost reminded me of a poem.

*“Be mindful of this when you kiss yours goodnight,
“Beware of the danger that lies in plain sight.”*

I still can’t remember where I first heard those lines.

The remaining defences just crumbled. No one in the town had seriously expected to have to fight off an armed invasion in such a manner and all of the people who should have been in authority were dead or missing. The Warriors charged into the town, shouting for the defenders to lay down their arms and surrender, promising good treatment to everyone who surrendered quickly enough to suit them. They made a fearsome sight, illuminated by burning buildings and seemingly unstoppable; far too many people, in my view, surrendered to them. The Warriors were surprisingly gentle, at first, ordering men and women back to their homes while they secured the entire town. Some of the defenders, those on the other side of the town, realised that all was lost and slipped away into the darkness, others came forward and tried to hide among the civilians, preparing for a later insurrection against the new masters of Summersville. The fighting ended, roughly, three hours after the first insurgent attack in the centre of Summersville.

The peace of the morning (hah) was broken by the arrival of the senior leadership of the Warriors of the Lord, a group of the Prophet’s most trusted, faithful and long-serving followers. (The Warriors, like so many other such groups, operated a seniority system. Those who had served the Prophet from before the War, those who had believed in him before Armageddon, had high status within the group.) They must have been a fearsome sight to nervous townspeople, those who watched them from behind drawn curtains, perhaps cursing their decision not to flee into the darkness. The uneasy peace was broken by an announcement through a loudspeaker, calling every citizen to come forth on pain of death. Slowly, one by one, they emerged and were pushed and prodded into an open area.

They were forced to watch, helplessly, as the Warriors searched their homes. They were no less brutal than the SS, or the Religious Police of a dozen states we used to call our allies, and they made a terrible mess out of nice clean homes. They hunted, in particular for food, weapons and anything else that might be useful. They confiscated every weapon they found,

disarming as much of the population as possible, and collected all the food in a set of warehouses in the centre of town. The former made resistance much – much – harder. The latter made controlling the townspeople much easy. A half-starved populace, as they had discovered over the last few months, would be much easier to brainwash into accepting the Warrior creed. Once the searches were over, the real horrors began.

The Warriors went through their prisoners carefully. Every black man and woman – including the escapees, who had fought desperately against being recaptured – was separated from the remainder, along with a smaller number of men and women from different, non-white races. I don't know why the Warriors had developed such a hatred for non-whites, frankly; they seemed almost to have taken lessons from the Ku Klux Klan. The prisoners were stripped naked, chained up, and marched out of town. We later found out that they had been forced to perform brute labour under fire.

They then separated out a handful of others. They took every religious personage in the town – including a Catholic priest and a Muslim Imam, of all things – and shot them in front of the crowd, who were then forced to listen to a haranguing speech on the evils of all other religions, with special attention being reserved for the Pope in Rome – now a radioactive crater – and the Muslims. A handful of people disputed with them and were shot down like dogs. A Baptist Priest died bravely under their fire. They didn't spare any of the religious types at all. There would be no faith, but that of the Warriors of the Lord.

Finally, they informed the population of their remaining fate. All of the men would be brought into their society as second-class citizens, but conversion and enthusiastic support of the Warriors of the Lord, they were promised, would bring fast advancement in the new society. The male children would no longer attend any of the regular schools in Summersville, but special schools staffed and run by the Warriors, where they would learn to become proper citizens of the new society. They'd end up brainwashed puppets of the Warriors. Catch a child, any child, young enough and you can bring them up to believe anything. The Warriors would ensure that they became as fanatical as the remainder of their group...and, though them, control their parents.

The women would be worse off, although not as badly off as the slaves. All female-owned businesses were ordered to close, or to be handed over to the male employees, and women were ordered to remain in the home unless escorted by a male relative. They would be expected to remain silent at all times, to obey male orders at once without question, and to wait hand and foot on their husbands or male relatives. They were strictly forbidden to bear arms, seek legal redress for any mistreatment, disobey their husbands under any circumstances and resist his sexual advances...or sexual advances from any of the Warriors. Four lesbians in Summersville, who had lived there ever since retiring from the city, stood up and flatly refused to obey such 'stupid, sexist, laws.' They were promptly grabbed, beaten, gang-raped and finally chained up and left to die. The lesson had sunk into the eyes of everyone watching.

The young girls wouldn't be going to school any more either. They would learn how to behave at their mother's elbow and wouldn't be allowed anything like the freedom of the male children. Hell, their only education would come from their mothers and the Warriors and the latter, at least, would be based around obeying the men. They wouldn't be allowed to learn how to read, or write, or use a computer, or anything that might give them any kind of power. They certainly wouldn't be allowed to learn how to use weapons. They weren't being

put in headscarves and veils yet, but it was probably just a matter of time. The Warriors were a sick male fantasy given flesh.

I had to admire the cunning of the scheme, even as I despised it. The Warriors had made everyone compliant in their crimes against humanity. The men in the town would be forced to take responsibility for their womenfolk, which would, in turn, force them to keep them under control. The women, knowing that they could be raped at any moment by any warrior, would want to stay indoors anyway; being thrown out of the house would be fatal. They would find themselves being broken down, bit by bit, into the model women – as the Warriors saw the model women – as reality and the hopelessness of the predicament sank in. They would have no choice. If they accepted the Warriors and their laws, they would find themselves trapped and bound to obey. If they refused...well, a horrible death awaited them.

It got worse. They'd made the men compliant in their crimes, which made it much harder for them to stop committing crimes, or to escape the Warrior control. Why do you think that the really evil and unpleasant gangs like the Tongs or the Mafia insist on newcomers committing murder for them as their first test? To kill someone, anyone, would change them forever and make it impossible for them to escape punishment, if they went to the authorities and confessed. They had sinned against what they *believed* to be right and the mental stigma would keep them firmly in their place. We rarely found Warriors who were willing to surrender to us in the early days of the war.

For Summersville, the next week was a nightmare. The Warriors patrolled everywhere and didn't hesitate to hand out any punishment they felt the situation deserved, from a whipping to immediate death. A handful of women, caught on the streets unescorted, were raped at once and then dumped back into their homes, there to wait for their menfolk. Resistance was quickly and brutally quashed; the handful of people who tried to fight back were quickly apprehended and killed. A handful of others escaped, somehow, and fled into the darkness towards us, but for most people, the noose held them firmly in place. They were trapped and at the mercy of the Warriors of the Lord. They were helpless.

There are basically two ways to run an occupation; hard and brutal, or soft and gentle. The Warriors favoured the former and had enough manpower and determination – or sheer unthinking fanatical belief – to make it stick. Given time, obedience would become habitable and the town's will would be broken. They thought that they had all the time in the world. They might well have been right. In Iraq, we simply hadn't had the manpower to dominate the entire country. The Warriors were operating on a much smaller scale and with much more ruthlessness. They seemed unbeatable.

We should have intervened at once, but we had problems of our own.

The Warriors intended to destroy us all.

Chapter Thirty

The most noble fate a man can endure is to place his own mortal body between his loved home and the war's desolation.

-Robert A. Heinlein

"They're coming, sir," Dutch said. "I can almost smell them."

I nodded. There *was* a faint smell in the air, a hint of burning, mixed in with the indefinably awful smell of dead or dying humans. We had raced down to the FOB as soon as we had heard the news, with Biggles high overhead providing what aerial reconnaissance and air cover he could, but I had the nasty feeling that I wouldn't be dictating the terms of our next engagement. Summersville had fallen to the enemy and, with that in their hands, they would know far too much about our defences. They would certainly know about the FOB...

After all, I thought grimly, where else had their messenger gone to deliver their message.

"We've interviewed all the refugees, of course," Dutch said. We hadn't kept the location of the FOB a secret in Summersville. It might have been a security oversight, but it might also have worked in our favour. "Only forty-seven people made it out, so far."

"So far," I agreed, staring into the distance. A tall column of black smoke was rising into the air from the direction of Summersville. Were they cooking everyone a meal, I wondered, or were they burning witches at the stake? I wouldn't have bet against the latter. The Reverend Thomas McNab had been very clear on just how extreme – and unconnected to the remainder of Christianity – the Warriors actually were. "What have you done with the refugees, Dutch?"

"In a field, under armed guard," Dutch said promptly, and I sighed in relief. "We had most of them cuffed to stakes or anything else that was reasonable convenient, just in case, apart from the ones we can vouch for personally. We have several dozen people here who came from Summersville and could identify most of the refugees."

"Good," I said. I hated to treat American citizens as potential enemies, but there was no choice. The Warriors of the Lord, just by pulling off a basic Trojan Horse trick, had made it difficult, if not outright impossible, to trust any other refugees. I recalled, once, a girl I'd met who had raved against the police, because they'd arrested her on suspicion of being a car thief. A liberal is a conservative who's just been arrested. She'd been soured on the police permanently. "I think we might want to think about relocating them to Stonewall, or at least the ones we can't trust..."

"Or even the ones who might have relatives in Summersville as well," Mac put in, from where he'd been peering into the distance. "I wouldn't put it past them to play the hostage game."

I grimaced. I'd seen that before, in Iraq and Afghanistan, but it had never been anything other than yet another horrific atrocity. The terrorists had taken someone – normally, but not always, a man – and told him that if he didn't spy on us, or take a bomb into an attack position, or do something else for them, his family would suffer. I always hated seeing that, not least because it was much harder to blame the victim, even if he had been trying to kill

me at the time. How could I blame him for doing whatever he needed to do to keep his family alive? It wasn't as if we'd started with a good reputation as a trustworthy group...and don't get me started on some of the various Iraqi or Afghani units. They were sometimes good, sometimes bad, sometimes corrupt...and if you picked the wrong unit, the results could be disastrous.

"True," I said, shaking my head. Take a random group of people – say twenty or so – from a city and chances were that none of them would be related. Do the same in a small town and you'd probably have several relatives right there, or close personal friends. I had no one in Ingalls who was related to me, with the possible exception of Rose, who had been my lover for months, but Mac had an entire family. Dutch had a family of his own in Salem. What would they do if the Warriors got to them? "What can we do about that?"

"Short of boosting security and trying to watch for people slipping out of our lines, I doubt that we can do anything," Dutch said, grimly. "We don't have the manpower to rotate anyone who might be remotely suspect – sorry, might be threatened or coerced into becoming a spy – out of the area."

"Yeah," Mac said. "If we can't stop them here, plenty more fuckers are going to turn to them and convert to their nut-zoid faith."

I nodded. A report out of Summersville had suggested that at least a hundred people, mainly men, had converted to the Warrior faith. I wanted to believe that it was a trick, but the paranoid part of my mind wondered if it was something else, perhaps even a series of real conversions. A person's behaviour changes, sometimes sharply, when the environment changes...and the inhabitants of Summersville had already lived through one massive change in the environment. How many of them would seriously consider converting to the new faith?

Stockholm syndrome, I thought, glumly. It was an article of faith among the SP community that hostages, held long enough by any group of terrorists, would start to lean towards the terrorists and their point of view. It was a defence mechanism in the human mind, I suspected, one that made their torment a little more bearable. It also explained how...compliant women in various parts of the world were with their own treatment. Resistance of any kind was seriously counter-survival. If the entire town was firmly under the Warriors and there was no hope of resistance, then it was quite likely that some of them would break under the strain and convert. They would rapidly end up becoming the most loyal servants the Warriors could hope for. After all, they would have burned their bridges behind them.

I said as much. "Yeah," Dutch agreed. "I know exactly what you mean."

"We should go after them," Mac said, firmly. "Ed, we have nearly a thousand soldiers here, with enough ammunition to fight a major battle. Why don't we take the offensive now?"

I wanted – needed – to agree with him. The Marine Corps trains its people to seize the initiative at all times and to operate inside the enemy's decision-making loop. I was sure that the Warriors would be far more cumbersome than we were, even though most of the 'soldiers' Mac was talking about had never seen a battle in their lives. Apart from the veterans, the only soldiers who had seen a battle were those who had gone after CORA. It

wasn't the finely-tuned force that I had fought in back in 2003. We hadn't known how lucky we had been at the time. They might be better than the Warriors, but if they attacked against a strong defence...

We might get chewed to ribbons.

And I couldn't allow that. We didn't have enough manpower to waste any of it. I wanted to intervene as much as Mac did, but I knew something about Summersville's defences and I knew that if the Warriors had repaired them – and with so much slave labour, it would be fairly easy, if time consuming – we would lose hundreds of men butting our heads against them. It would be much simpler to force them to attack us, break them – I wouldn't allow them to slip a force into my rear – and then recover Summersville. The only question was how long I could wait for them to attack before the demands that *we* attack became irresistible.

I explained that to Mac and Dutch. Dutch accepted the argument at once; he'd been watching helplessly, after all, as the Warriors secured Summersville and the surrounding area. There had been a handful of skirmishes, but neither side had seen fit to press the offensive. Mac was much less impressed, pointing to the American citizens trapped inside the town, at the mercy of the Warriors. The reports we had received of the disarming of the population and the soul-crushing repression had not been encouraging. I would have liked to have believed that the townspeople would rise up against them, but I doubted that that was possible.

"Ed, we can't leave them there much longer," he protested. "We have to save them before there's nothing left to save."

"And we could end up winning the battle," I pointed out, "and losing the entire war."

I cursed – yes, again – the shortage of intelligence. The refugees had suggested that the Warriors in the town numbered in the thousands. If that were all they had, taking the risk of attacking might be justified, but I had a sneaking suspicion that their numbers were much higher. High enough to absorb the losses from our attack and keep coming? If they didn't care if they lived or died – a common problem when fanatics were involved – they might be quite happy to take five to one losses...and keep coming. We couldn't endure that for long.

"We can't risk it," I said, finally. One thing I like about the military chain of command is that it is inviolate. (Of course, like all strengths, it can be a disadvantage at times. The man on the spot normally has a better grasp of what's going on than the guy skulking in the rear areas, or in Washington, trying to micromanage at very long distance.) "Mac, we cannot risk heavy losses."

He nodded, sullenly. "I don't know how long our morale will hold up," he said. "It looks very much as if we're just waiting here and allowing them to get on with it."

"They're going to attack us," Dutch said, firmly. "We're blocking their route up to Ingalls and the other Principle Towns." Salem, part of me noted with a droll moment of amusement, was northwards of Ingalls and would probably be the last to fall. If the Warriors had the resources to attack all of the towns at the same time, we might as well seek the best terms we could for surrender. "They have to come here, Mac, and when they do we'll beat the holy living shit out of them."

“Of course we will,” I agreed, grateful for the change in subject. I shared Mac’s desire for immediate action, but I couldn’t agree to take the risk. Not for the first time, I wished for the entire 1st Marine Division, or even the 3rd Infantry. Hell, I would have sold my soul for a few more heavy weapons and tanks. “We’ll just inspect the defences and then wait for intelligence from the scouts.”

Dutch had taken the precaution of sending a handful of scouts out to try to gather what intelligence they could. I doubted that they would learn much – they weren’t fully-qualified SF soldiers, just people who liked sneaking around – but it wasn’t something that we could overlook. I had sent Biggles down here for the same reason, after all, and I’d even had a nearby field adapted to serve as an airfield. I’d have liked an entire squadron or two of Apaches, but I’d settle for Biggles and his aircraft. I could even hear him buzzing around in the air.

He’d also done well with the defences, I agreed. They’d dug trenches, emplaced barriers and concealed mines everywhere that the enemy might use as a line of advance. The designer of the defences had had a nasty sense of humour, Dutch said; he’d used barbed wire to catch unwanted guests, trapping them in the line of fire from emplaced machine guns, or leading them into minefields. There were parts of the defences that looked criminally weak, at least to civilian eyes, but that was a military trick as old as war itself. The enemy would come onwards, scenting victory, only to run into pre-registered mortar fire and other, nastier tricks. Patty and Stacy, two of seventeen snipers, even had places to hide and work their deadly art.

“The Warriors of the Lord seem to like outlandish costumes for their leaders,” Dutch explained, when I questioned having the girls so far forward. “If we’re lucky, we can pick a few of them off and hopefully dissuade the bastards from pressing their attack.”

“Hopefully,” I agreed, grimly. The young men manning the ramparts – or running through exercise after exercise – all looked confoundedly young. Very few of them had any conception of what they were about to go through, if the Warriors attacked...no, Dutch was right, the Warriors had to attack. They might have been fanatics, but they had to know that we were sitting right in front of them, and if they bypassed us, we would tear their supply lines wide open. They hadn’t played it stupid so far and I doubted that they would change now. They’d come after us once they were confident that they had enough firepower to blow us into orbit. “What about the GOTH plan?”

Dutch looked grim. I didn’t blame him. The GOTH plan – the GO To Hell plan – is for when all else fails. It was normally attempted while the lines were disintegrating and command and control was falling apart. It wasn’t the kind of plan any halfway competent commanding officer would attempt to use; hell, it was rare for them to look good even on paper. If we had to use it, with barely-trained soldiers and ill-prepared plans, we were likely to be fucked when everything went badly wrong. I wouldn’t even consider it...except it was my duty to consider it. I was the command, after all, and the buck stopped with me.

“When we blow retreat, we break out, armoured vehicles in the lead,” Dutch said, unwillingly. The armoured vehicles, after all, were hardly Abrams tanks or Bradley fighting vehicles, but technicals. We’d armoured them as well as we could, but if the enemy had antitank weapons, they’d burn through them like a knife through butter. “We pull out as many people as we can and blow up the defences as we retreat and hope.”

It sounded like a disaster waiting to happen, I knew, but what other choice was there?

“Sounds like a plan,” Mac said, dryly. “We’re all going to die, aren’t we?”

“Probably,” I agreed. “I wonder if...”

My radio buzzed once. “Boss, this is your friendly eye-in-the-sky,” Biggles’ said, his voice coming through a haze of static. We hadn’t managed to convince him to use anything like proper radio protocols. It hardly mattered at the moment. We only had one plane so far – although the engineers thought that two more of the older planes could be repaired, given time – and he was the only active pilot. “I think you’re going to have company coming in the next half hour.”

Dutch nodded, listening to his own radio. “The spotters confirm,” he said, grimly. “They’re on the march. They’ll be here soon enough.”

“Sound the alarm,” I ordered, quickly. I trusted Dutch to get the soldiers into position while I took a look at the opposition. We’d erected a watchtower on the edge of the estate and Mac and I scrambled up to peer in the direction of Summersville. “Shit.”

The Warriors looked to be coming in a never-ending stream of men – and yes, they were all men. I knew, logically, that they couldn’t have infinitive manpower, but somehow it was hard to convince myself of that while I was looking at them. Some rode horses, some rode a handful of vehicles, but most of them were marching in something reassembling a standard march. My old Drill Instructor would have lost his cool completely if *we* had marched like that, although honesty compelled me to admit that our army wouldn’t have marched in a much better order. We hadn’t drilled *that* much in the formalities, even if they did help to improve discipline.

“Look at that truck,” Mac said, peering through his own binoculars. I followed his gaze and frowned. The vehicle had started life as a fairly basic truck, as far as I could tell, but someone had...no, I realised; I had been wrong. The vehicle had started life as a police van, one designed to serve for extreme riot control, armed with water cannons and tear gas launchers, with perhaps nastier weapons held in reserve. Someone – one of the Warriors, I suspected – had added extra defences, in the form of portable man-carried riot shields, emplaced around the vehicle. Somehow, I was sure that the non-lethal weapons had been replaced by something more deadly. It wasn’t a tank, but it was deadly enough to be a pain in the ass.

Mac took it as a personal challenge. “You want to use a Javelin on that thing, Ed?”

“Not yet,” I said, watching as the Warriors deployed. They probably thought that they were out of range and, for most of the soldiers, they would have been right. Patty and Stacy could probably have shot several of them before they finished getting their forces organised and began the attack. “I wonder if...”

One of the Warriors kicked his horse and cantered forwards, towards the outermost defence line. I watched, mildly concerned about the minefield in front of the poor creature – I meant the horse, of course. I had never really liked horses, but my heart went out to the animal as it

came closer. It would have probably been happier munching grass somewhere west of here, not carrying a messenger wearing a silly outfit. It was almost as if he *wanted* to be targeted by the snipers.

My radio buzzed. “Sir,” Patty said, “should we shoot him?”

“Not yet,” I said, calmly. Morbidly, I was wondering what would happen when they hit the minefield. “Just wait for a moment and see what happens.”

The horse stopped and the messenger pulled a megaphone from one of the saddlebags. I felt my brow furrow as I took in his position. He was only a bare metre from the minefield. Had someone told him its rough location?

“YOU ARE ORDERED TO SURRENDER,” he shouted, through the megaphone. It was almost like the voice of God himself, a thought that had probably not occurred to him. I couldn’t even tell if it was the same person I had met before, but they definitely shared the same supercilious air. “IF YOU SURRENDER, YOU WILL NOT BE HARMED!”

My men shouted back a series of rude suggestions about his offer, some of them quite imaginative. I had a better idea for a response.

“Patty,” I said, keying my radio, “shoot him.”

Chapter Thirty-One

Ludendorff: The English soldiers fight like lions.

Hoffmann: True. But don't we know that they are lions led by donkeys.

-German Generals Erich Ludendorff and Max Hoffmann, 1917

The messenger crumpled off the horse and fell to the ground, his head striking the ground at an unnatural angle. It was quite pointless. He had died the second the bullet had passed through his temple and blown his brains out. I'd half-hoped that his head would explode like a watermelon hit by a hammer, but it's not *that* easy to blow a person's brains to bits, no matter what they show in the movies. Realism takes a back seat to drama every day.

"Direct hit," Mac exulted. "We got the bastard!"

I smiled, but watched the Warriors carefully. It would be wonderful if they just turned and fled, but somehow I doubted that they would make that mistake, not when there were dozens of other priests – or whatever they called them; I just thought of them as priests – in their army. They seemed to be shifting nervously, barking orders even as they scrambled off their horses or motorbikes, and I winced as I realised that some of them were using radios. The Warriors of the Lord might look ramshackle – hell, we looked ramshackle – but their leaders were incompetent. They were just in a position where they had to attack us directly to break through and hit the rest of the Principle Towns.

What would I do, I wondered, *if I was in their position*. I certainly wouldn't attack directly unless I had no other choice. I'd try to lay siege to the FOB, or use heavy weapons to blast the defenders from a distance, not when the costs of a direct assault would be too high. The Warriors...how many heavy weapons did they have, anyway? I peered down at their seething ranks and saw nothing bigger than an assault rifle, although some of them were clearly carrying grenades and improvised explosive charges. Some of the gang-bangers on the streets, before the war, had had quite a line in improvised weapons. The Warriors of the Lord, with all the resources of an entire congregation of fanatical believers, could have purchased almost anything. Hell, given enough time, they could even have produced poison gas. We were looking at the possibility ourselves.

"Here they come," Mac said. He'd sensed it before I had; the quick shifting tremors that marked a group of soldiers preparing to attack, when harmless civilians transformed themselves into deadly insurgents. "Ed..."

I keyed my radio. "Patty, Stacy, fire at will," I ordered. I couldn't help myself. "If you can't find Will, fire at the enemy."

The Warriors charged at us, howling blasphemous shouts and threats as they raced towards us, the lead Warriors firing as they came. Dutch didn't wait for my order. As soon as the Warriors entered range, he gave the order to open fire and Warriors started to fall. Given the nature of the weapons we were employing, them being in range of us meant, almost certainly, that we were in their range, but most of our people were dug in, protected from the hail of bullets. I saw Warriors dying as our bullets slashed into their bodies, some falling to the ground, others being pushed forward by the momentum of their advance, shielding their comrades with their dying bodies. I would have admired their discipline, perhaps, if I had

felt it was real discipline, rather than the unthinking rage of the mob. The ones at the rear were pushing the ones at the front forward to die.

Mac evidently had the same thought. “Poor bastards,” he breathed. “They don’t stand a chance.”

I wasn’t sure that I agreed. No, that was a lie. Looking at them, I definitely didn’t agree. I had felt sorry for some of the insurgents in Iraq, some of the ones who had been forced to fight us at gunpoint, but the Warriors didn’t look as if someone was driving them to the battle with cattle prods. They looked consumed by their rage and religious fervour, their eyes bright with madness – and perhaps a few illegal drugs – as they swept towards us. They had once been American citizens, perhaps bankers, perhaps lawyers, perhaps even fast food waiters, but now...they were monsters. I looked into their eyes, through my binoculars, and I believed every horrible tale that had come out of their advance. They no longer had any sense of right or wrong.

“They’re going to hit the mines soon,” I said, and thought rapidly before lifting my radio. “Dutch, keep the special mines back. We’re going to need them later.”

The Warriors ran over the minefield and kept coming; there was a distance absence of explosions. I smiled, not put out in the least, as they kept coming. We had improved the minefield, even if we had had to improvise most of the mines, in the days since the gang-bangers had attacked Ingalls. The Warriors might have been warned of the minefield’s existence, but as it failed to explode, they grew more confident and pushed onwards. I watched, smiling tightly, as the lead Warriors reached the final mine...

There’s an odd belief that minefields are illegal and shouldn’t be used in warfare. The people who believe that, and press for minefields being banned from war, mean well; mines are a horrific weapon, one that lingers for years after the war. (Afghanistan is still trying to clear mines from the Russian invasion, let alone the insurgency against the Coalition forces attempting to defeat the Taliban.) They’re also fools. Given the situation we faced – which has been faced by thousands upon thousands of soldiers throughout history – did they really think that I would accept unnecessary casualties just to make them feel good about themselves? I didn’t have any intention of losing more men than I had to, whatever a dead former English princess had thought, and we’d used our imaginations in making the first minefield as deadly as possible.

We’d rigged it so that it wouldn’t explode until the final mines had been reached, by which time dozens, perhaps hundreds, of Warriors would be on the mines when it exploded. It was a chancy experiment – we didn’t have the perfect weapons manufactured in a military laboratory, but improvised ones constructed in a tearing hurry, always a bad sign – but it worked. The final mines were reached and they all detonated with a terrifying explosion. The Warriors on the minefield were caught in the blast, their legs disintegrating into bloody chunks as they fell to the ground, most of them still alive and screaming in pain. Perhaps, I hoped, it had shocked them out of their fanatical belief in victory.

The interesting thing about mines – which adds, I should admit, to their horror – is that they don’t always kill attackers. Oh, some are always lethal to the poor bastard who steps on them – and some are designed to make the lives of the tankers miserable, rather than the poor dumb infantry – but many of the lighter weapons are designed to inflict horrible injuries, without

killing the victim. You've probably seen the pictures from Cause of the Week Nation, the poor legless girl, or ex-soldier crawling in the gutter; they may – there's no guarantee that the reported incident is what actually happened – have had a close encounter with an antipersonnel mine. They hadn't been killed outright, but badly maimed.

Why? An army that doesn't care, even slightly, for its wounded is an army that is going to have a serious morale problem. Soldiers can face death bravely, but the prospect of being horrifyingly maimed is far worse, even for me. The army would have to take the wounded back to their medics, if they had medics, and do what they could for them, while the unwounded men would see the wounded victims and lose all heart for the battle. Parading some of the wounded ex-insurgents from Iraq in communities that could have gone either way hadn't been an American idea, but it had been surprisingly effective. But then, most of the Iraqis who had been killed hadn't been hardcore insurgents, just desperate young men out to make what money they could.

"They're not breaking," Mac said, grimly. I watched in disbelief as the Warriors charged over the bodies of their moaning comrades and kept coming, bringing their heavier weapons to bear on our positions. They shouldn't have been able to keep coming, not after that, but as far as I could tell, they hadn't even hesitated. Their minds were just as cracked up as the Zombies, I realised with a thrill of horror; their comrades, and their pain and suffering, no longer existed in their world. They were probably ensuring their deaths by leaving them to bleed out and die, but they didn't care. They just wanted to get to us. "Ed, we'll have to use the machine guns on them."

I keyed my radio. "Section Four" – the machine gunners – "prepare to open fire on my command."

The problem with machine guns is that you can shoot them dry very quickly. Any normal pre-war FOB, or patrol base, would have had – quite literally – millions of rounds in stock for use. We didn't have anything like enough rounds for the machine guns, so I'd given orders to hold them back as long as possible, just in case they weren't going to be needed. This was turning into one of those situations where you needed a fire hose-like stream of bullets to stop the enemy, which was fine by me...as long as the bullets held out. If they didn't hold out, we would be in serious trouble when the Warriors broke through.

"They're coming," Mac said. I nodded. The machine guns would hit them before they hit the second minefield. If we were lucky, they might even convince them to break off, but I was starting to suspect that the battle was going to be won by the side that killed the other side off first. How many fanatics did the Warriors have, after all, and how many could they spend? "Ed..."

"Yeah," I said, feeling cold horror spreading through my soul. I keyed my radio. "Section Four, fire at will."

The chattering of the machine guns almost deafened me, but the effect on the Warriors in the lead was nothing short of spectacular. A standard machine gun pumps out hundreds of rounds a minute and each of the Warriors was hit by dozens of bullets, most of which went through their flesh, came out the other side, and ran into the next line of Warriors. Some of their bodies literally disintegrated, sending other Warriors tumbling to the ground, tripping over their former comrades, creating a domino effect that brought others down. It reminded

me, chillingly, of a tale told by an Iraqi officer I'd met once, who'd been on a visit to Mecca during one of the riots. The crowd had stumbled over one another and dozens had been crushed to death as they collapsed to the ground. I wondered, briefly, what had happened to him. He'd had grand plans to invade Saudi Arabia one day and recover the Holy City. He might even have had a chance to do just that in the chaos caused by the Final War.

"They're stumbling back," Mac announced, with delight. For the first time, we saw the Warriors hesitate, their line wavering backwards and forwards as the machine guns played their deadly trade. They fell out of line, seeking what cover they could, a handful even breaking down and weeping. They'd been shocked out of their trance, I realised, even though we couldn't risk trying to take them prisoner. They'd be lucky if they managed to crawl out of the battlefield before the warriors regrouped. Their former comrades would probably treat them as heretics. "Ed, we can break them..."

"Maybe," I said, unconvinced. The fire they were directing at us was unabated. We hadn't taken many casualties, but we'd certainly lost a handful of men...and we couldn't afford to lose many of them. The mines might have been more effective than I had dared to hope, but the outer minefield had been expended and we couldn't hope to replace it while under enemy fire. I had considered sending a team out to do what they could, but it would have been suicidal. The Warrior snipers might not have been as good as Patty or Stacy, but they were enthusiastic. "Here they come again..."

They appeared out of the haze like black ninjas, wearing posier outfits that made me smile...and carrying long tubes that wiped the smile off my face. A basic mortar can be set up and used easily by two men – hell, there are some mortars that can be used by a man operating on his own – and they provided considerable firepower to the attackers. Patty and Stacy acted without orders – good girls – and shot down four of the enemy mortar team before they got into position, but once they were in position, they were effectively safe. A withering hail of fire swept our positions whenever we tried to slip someone down to deal with them.

"Get our own mortars up," I snapped, into the radio. We'd pre-registered them to engage the Warriors when the terrain funnelled them into a killing zone, but we didn't have any other weapons that could engage their mortars. I would have loved a radar system that could have tracked the shells and a long-range multi-barrelled artillery weapon, but we didn't have any of them. It wouldn't have been *that* useful. We knew where the Warriors were, after all, but we didn't have a weapon that could hit them, apart from our own mortars.

The dull CRUMP, CRUMP, CRUMP of the mortars issued out over the battlefield as they launched the first shells into our position. They didn't have any idea of just what to shoot at, I saw with some relief, and there was a distantly random tinge to their firing, but sooner or later they would hit something through sheer luck. Some of our positions might have been able to survive a direct hit, but most of them weren't *that* well prepared. One of the shells came down in the middle of a small lake the original owner had used as a fishpond – and we had promptly turned into a R&R facility – and sent water flying everywhere, another came down on top of a reserve position. Given time, and luck, they'd take us apart.

"The mortar team is ready to engage," my radio buzzed. "Do we have clearance to fire?"

“Granted,” I said, quickly. The enemy were spreading out – one of them had lost an arm to a shot from Patty, or perhaps Stacy – and soon it would be harder to suppress their fire. “Take the bastards out!”

The two mortar units duelled for a long moment, both sides trying to knock the other out before they were knocked out themselves, but my attention was distracted by a sight in the distance. The dead bodies – and the remaining wounded, moaning piteously to themselves as they lay on the ground, bleeding their lives away – had left the ground covered with blood and torn up by explosions until it was damn near unrecognisable. It wasn't that that distracted me, even though I imagined that some battles in the Civil War had looked like that afterwards, but the sight of the Warriors regrouping, further away. They were evidently organising themselves for another charge.

“Dutch,” I said, keying my radio, “give me a roll call. How many have we lost?”

Another explosion from the mortar duel interrupted his words. “Fourteen down, sir,” Dutch said. “Seven have been badly wounded and need urgent treatment; nineteen have been lightly wounded and are refusing to leave their posts.”

My lips quirked. We hadn't bred cowards, after all, although depending on their wounds, some of them might not have been the smartest cookies in the pack. Dutch would see to that, in any case. If they were too badly wounded to fight effectively, they would have to be sent to the hospital tent after all, no matter how determined they were to fight. I didn't want to be served by fanatics. They always tend to think more about winning the battle rather than winning the war.

But there was another problem. I had been brought up never to lead a man behind – or a comrade's body. If we held the FOB, we could have the dead buried properly, but if we were driven out, we would be abandoning their bodies. It may sound silly to worry about that at the time, when we were in danger of being overrun when the Warriors returned to the battle, but I cared about their bodies. I didn't want them to be desecrated by the Warriors if they captured them. Some of our enemies had taken an unholy delight in such atrocities and had used them as weapon.

It's not as if we can cut and run from this engagement, I thought, with a sudden flash of rage that surprised even me. I had always hated how our political leaders had seemed to waver to and fro on every issue, leaving the outside world to decide that Uncle Sam was a coward at heart, but now...now, we couldn't escape the war. The Warriors would be defeated, or they would defeat us. Compromise would be impossible. The very nature of their regime would see to that.

“Ed,” Mac said, suddenly, “it's starting.”

I heard the roar of engines in the distance and peered towards them through my binoculars...and swore.

“Shit,” I said, horrified. “Mac, *look!*”

The Warriors had pulled a new trick out of their sleeves...and this one might just stop us from shooting back at them. I don't know why it surprised me so much. Perhaps I had

expected better from Americans, even half-mad religious fanatics. This was right out of the terrorist handbook...

The bastards were using human shields.

Chapter Thirty-Two

C'est magnifique, mais ce n'est pas la guerre. C'est de la folie.
(It is magnificent, but it is not war. It is madness.)

- French Marshal Pierre Bosquet

“My God,” Ed breathed. “Those disgusting bastards...”

The first wave of human shields were black men, their faces an unhealthy grey pallor as they were pushed forwards towards our defences. They were naked, without even the dignity of a loincloth or underpants, their bodies marked and scarred with signs of regular beatings. Their hands were tied behind their backs and their legs were shackled, forcing them to stumble forwards, unable to run or even to fight. They had no choice, but to walk towards our lines...

It wasn't the slaves who held my attention. That was reserved for the girls. They were naked, too, and secured firmly to the sides of various vehicles, or forced to stumble along behind the first wave of human shields. None of them could have been older than eighteen, but they were all terrified, shaking as they stumbled forward. One of them fell to the ground and a Warrior brought a club down on her head, killing her instantly. Her naked body was left there to bleed into the ground, adding her blood to that of the hundreds of Warriors who had been killed in the fighting. The Warrior who'd killed her fell to the ground as a shot rang out; Patty or Stacy – or both – had killed him. I hoped it had hurt when the bullet passed through his brain.

“Shit, Ed,” Mac said. He knew the most likely outcome of any battle as well as I did. The human shields, male and female alike, would be torn apart in the crossfire. We'd managed to save hundreds of human shields in Iraq during the war, but that had been with highly-trained and experienced troops...and we'd still lost hundreds of others. They weren't religious at all, I decided; the antichrist they so feared lay in their hearts, forcing them to commit evil acts in the name of God. “We can't fire without killing the poor bastards.”

“I know,” I said, knowing that we would have no choice. The human shields might have been advancing with all the enthusiasm of a boy who knows his father intends to blister his behind when he arrives home, but they couldn't stay back forever. A single sweep with our machine guns could have killed them all, but they would have soaked up fire that should have been expended on the Warriors. Those miserable bastards had pulled our claws. How many of my soldiers, unused to such an environment, would obey an order to fire on the Warriors, knowing that someone innocent would be caught in the crossfire and die?

“Christina,” someone shouted, from the ramparts. “Christina, *Christina!*”

I swore, again. That hadn't occurred to me, but we did have people from Summersville in the force. If some of them had sweethearts or lovers in the town, and logically some of them would have such connections, then...they might see their friends advancing towards them, expecting to be killed at any moment by their own side. One of them, clearly, had seen his girlfriend among the naked girls, stripped of her dignity and left to die by her captors.

I keyed my radio. “Dutch, take that poor man out of the line and get him back to the vehicles,” I ordered. Suddenly, the entire position had become effectively untenable. Once the slaves reached the minefield – the inner minefield – and detonated it, which they would,

we would be fighting at knife-range. They'd have the numbers advantage and the fanatical determination to keep fighting. "Get the wounded to the vehicles as well and prepare to use the GOTH plan."

"Understood, sir," Dutch said. He didn't sound eager and I didn't blame him, but there was no choice. We would be lucky if we managed to extract half of the force from the FOB before it was completely overrun. "I'll see to it at once."

"Yes," I muttered, as I returned the radio to my belt. "They're on their way."

The first line of vehicles was advancing slowly up towards the barricades. I couldn't understand their tactics, despite the presence of a dozen naked girls fastened firmly to the front and sides of the trucks. The driver might be transporting a dozen Warriors with the intention of trying to push through the defences, or...memory crystallised and I became utterly certain that I knew what they were doing. They weren't trying to keep their people safe; they were deploying truck bombs against us...and those trucks could carry enough explosive to blow right through the barricades.

I lifted the radio to my lips and prayed, under my breath, that they would listen. "Section Six," I ordered, "take them out. Now!"

Section Six – the team with our three priceless antitank weapons – hesitated. "Sir," the leader protested, "they have hostages..."

"And those vehicles are packed with explosives," I snapped, wondering if the bomber driving the vehicles knew what he was doing. He might have been a willing volunteer to die for the glory of the Warriors of the Lord, or he might have been a patsy unaware of what he was carrying. I'd seen both kinds of bomber in my long experience. "Take them out...oh, *Jesus...*"

The first wave of slaves, shambling forward like zombies from that successful film, had reached the inner minefield. The lead mines detonated, sending chunks of blood and gore flying everywhere as they blew the poor bastards into wounded animals, shrieking their agony, but the Warriors forced the remainder onwards, trying to use them to sweep away the remaining mines. I'd heard of the principle of driving sheep across minefields, as done back in the days of the First World War, but I hadn't seen anything like this before. No one in their right mind would have seriously considered it as a way to clear minefields, if only because it was so wasteful. The Prophet of the Warriors had to be completely and utterly barking mad!

"Fire," Dutch shouted, and the ramparts obeyed. With the first wave of human shields out of the way, no matter how it had been done, the Warriors who had forced them forward could be swept away without hesitation. They died in their dozens as they tried to seek cover, but they couldn't move fast enough to escape our revenge. The remaining human shields, the girls who weren't on the advancing trucks, cringed back, but they were held firmly in place.

I keyed my radio again. "Take those damn trucks out now," I ordered. I was breaking one of the cardinal rules of leading an army – never give an order you don't think will be obeyed – but I had no choice. The lead truck, and its deadly cargo, was almost at the first barricade.

It would be running over one of the remaining mines – if one remained intact – at any moment. “Hit it now or...”

The missile was fired, lancing right towards the truck. It hit...and the world went white. I cringed, my senses screaming *nuke*, even though I knew that that was impossible, as the blast wave hit, knocking me to the ground. I hit hard enough to hurt, despite the padding of the body armour...and I could have blanked out for a second. Mac hit the ground beside me and shook me hard, shouting at me. All I could hear was a ringing in my ears. It was a few seconds before I could even stand up and look towards where the truck bomb had detonated.

If it had detonated any closer, we would have been screwed. Where it had been, along with its unwilling cargo of hostages, was nothing, but a massive crater. There was absolutely no trace of the girls...and, I saw, the second and third trucks had lost their human shields, killed or blown off by the first blast. Even at such a distance, it had wrecked havoc on the defences...and the second and third truck bombs were on their way. If they detonated, we were definitely fucked...

I grabbed for my radio and discovered, with a curse, that it was broken. The tactical radio was supposed to be very hard to break, even in a combat zone, but evidently the warranty had expired. Mac checked his and passed it to me, but it was almost too late. God bless the machine gunners, those who had survived the blast. They hosed the remaining trucks down with machine gun fire until one of them staggered to a stop and the other one detonated. I blinked away spots on my eyes at the combined explosions – judging from the smell, they’d improvised the explosives from fertiliser – and took stock of the defences. It wasn’t good news. We had a breach large enough for them to ram an entire armed force through and tear us a new asshole.

I keyed Mac’s radio. “Dutch, have everyone fall back to the inner defence area and get to the vehicles,” I ordered. This was going to be bad. Very bad. “Order the machine gunners to hold them as long as possible, along with the mortar sections. We’re going to have to make a run for it.”

The Warriors howled and charged up towards us, passing through the wrecked craters without much difficulty. The machine gunners opened fire and killed at least a dozen of them in the first shot, but the remainder had managed to reach cover and advance in a slightly more disciplined order. They advanced, jerking forward and covering each other, while supported by the men in the rear. Their mortar teams weren’t that good, not compared to ours, but they were learning fast and they seemed to have ammunition to burn. It wouldn’t be long, I realised, before they forced us right out of the defences and took the FOB.

Mac grabbed my arm. “Ed, time to move,” he said, firmly, unslinging his rifle and checking it briskly. I checked my own out of habit. The fall we’d taken might have damaged the weapon. The M16 was a good weapon, but it didn’t have the AK-47s survivability. In a few years, we’d probably be duplicating AK-47s for ourselves, despite the irony. If tribesmen in a cave under Afghanistan could do it, so could we. “We can’t stay here, boss.”

He was right, but I didn’t want to run, or hide. I wanted to stay and fight. “Mac...”

“There’s no time,” he said, quickly. “Come along before I have to slug you and pretend it never happened.”

I scowled at him as we scrambled down towards the vehicles, which had been parked as close to the north side of the defences as we dared. A single mortar round in the wrong place and we would have had to flee on foot. The vehicles were already being checked, I was relieved to discover, with the wounded and the nurses loaded onto the most heavily-protected vehicles. Dutch was organising a rearguard as I came up to him, leading a group of volunteers to hold the line while the remainder of us made our escape. I didn't want to leave him or anyone else, but what other choice did I have?

Besides, it wasn't as if Mac was going to allow me to remain behind.

"They're coming," Dutch said, as the noise of shooting grew louder. The Warriors had scented our weakness and were pouring their forces into the breach, howling as they lunged towards us. It wouldn't take them long to punch their way through into the rearguard position; they were already sneaking forces around the FOB to prevent an escape. They would have to be forced out of the way, but that wasn't going to be easy. A single shot in the wrong place and one of our vehicles would be permanently useless...

And yet there was no panic. They were all good kids. The only person who had become hysterical had been the poor boy who'd seen his girlfriend in the group of human shields. The poor bitch was dead now – she had to be dead now – and I could only hope that she was in a better place. The Warriors might have claimed to be acting in God's name, but I knew better. They served the devil. It was funny how much easier it was to accept that as the literal truth, but after all, as the saying goes, there are no atheists in foxholes.

"I know," I said. The shooting was growing closer as well, backed up by the dull thudding of the mortars and even a pair of missiles, targeted on our machine gun nests. A warhead designed to melt through a tank wouldn't have much problem with the machine gun emplacements, even though we'd fortified them as well as we could. Anyone inside was probably dead or wishing they were. I just hoped that we hadn't left anyone behind for the Warriors to capture. I thought that we had accounted for everyone, but the entire situation was breaking down. "Are you sure...?"

"Yes," Dutch said firmly. He winked at me. "You get out of here and give your lady a fuck from me. Get them all out of here and set up the next defence line. We'll break them as surely as we broke Saddam after a few more victories like this one."

"I hope you're right," I said, and held out my hand. He shook it firmly. "Good luck."

Mac shook his hand as well, and then turned to the vehicles. "It's time," he said. There was a grim final note in his voice, almost as if he didn't expect to see nightfall. "All aboard. I'm triggering the bombs in two minutes."

We'd used almost all of the mines, apart from a handful that had been held in reserve to the north, based on a trick some bastard had invented in Iraq. We'd filled two massive crates with explosives and buried them somewhere the enemy had to go if they wanted to block our escape. There was no guarantee of anything, but if we were lucky, the explosions would distract any of the survivors long enough for us to make our escape stick. Mac winked at me as I took a seat on one of the technicals, just behind a machine gun that had been positioned to engage targets at any angle, and pushed down on a remote control. For a second, nothing

happened...and then the ground shook as the first mine detonated. There was enough explosive power there, the experts had sworn, to flip an Abrams tank end for end. The result was, quite literally, apocalyptic for anyone unfortunate enough to be anywhere near the blasts.

“Drive, drive, drive,” Mac yelled, as the gates swung open. We hadn’t been able to open them fully beforehand – it would have given the game away rather obviously – but we’d removed enough of the barricade to let us out safely, and quickly. That was the important part, as far as I was concerned. In this case, an absence of haste meant waste. “Here come the drums!”

I want to make it clear that this was *not* my idea. Mac came up with the idea of hooking a CD player to a set of loudspeakers we’d discovered in the estate and playing music loudly enough to stun anyone who wasn’t expecting it, including the Warriors – we hoped. He had wanted the *March of Cambreadth*, but I was thoroughly sick of that song...and if I caught the bastard who convinced the militia that it was a great marching song, I was going to put him on the front lines stark naked. It was a great song the first time I heard it. By the millionth time, or so it felt, I was sick of it. Instead, we fled to the noise of Voodoo Child...

*“So here it comes, the sound of drums,
“(Here come the drums, here come the drums.)*

*“Baby, baby, baby,
“You are my voodoo child, my voodoo child,
“Don't say maybe maybe,
“It's supernatural, I'm comin' undone.”*

I don’t know what it did to the Warriors – they probably considered it blasphemous - but by God it frightened me.

The vehicle gunned its engines and leapt forward, leading the way down the road towards the interstate and then up towards Ingalls...and the next defensive line. I hung on for dear life, hoping that Mac had managed to get onto one of the other vehicles before the charge started, watching out carefully for any signs of hostile action. Fires were burning in the direction of where the mines had detonated – we’d included a little something in the explosive mix to encourage fires – but at first we saw no signs of the Warriors. We couldn’t hear anything over the sounds of Voodoo Child, but we saw, from time to time, some individual Warriors trying to get to us. The gunners cut them down with swift precise bursts and we drove past them, not even slowing to take better aim. There was no need. The Warriors had no choice, but to show themselves, just to take a shot at us. We gunned them down mercilessly. Whatever restraints we had once acknowledged had died in the heat of battle.

Behind us, the remains of the FOB burned. I turned my head, craning it as far back as I could to look at the burning ruins, but there was no sign of Dutch or any of the rearguard. I could still hear Voodoo Child until it cut off suddenly, accompanied by a massive explosion. The Warriors had probably hit something explosive and destroyed the loudspeakers. There was some shooting, brief isolated bursts of fire drifting in the warm air, but nothing else. Silence was gradually falling as we drove away from the scene of recent carnage...

And we had lost the battle. It did not, I decided, bode well for the future.

A few more battles like that and we would be ruined.

And when we got to the next set of defensive lines, we discovered that Mac wasn't with us any longer. He'd remained behind until the end.

Chapter Thirty-Three

The only thing worse than a battle won is a battle lost.

-Duke of Wellington

“Not Christians,” Reverend Thomas McNab said. His voice had absolutely no give in it at all. “They’re nothing like us.”

I gave him a reproving look. The half-wrecked warehouse had once belonged to a packing company and had contained a surprising amount of useful equipment. We had stripped it of everything that could be useful; now, it was packed with dozens of wounded men, receiving what medical care we could give them under the firelight. Outside, the remainder of the force I’d led to the FOB waited, some huddling around fires, others watching for advancing enemy forces. It looked, to my eyes, like a scene from another world.

“They think they’re Christians,” I said, bitterly. I felt numb deep inside my heart, as if the events of the day hadn’t quite caught up with me. I was one of the lucky ones. There were several soldiers who had started to sob as soon as they were out of danger and had gone completely to pieces, despite everything we could do for them. They’d been shell-shocked during the battle and would take time to recover. I’d been forced to send them back to Ingalls and hope that they recovered. “How do they do it?”

I remembered, chillingly, the vast waves of human fodder coming on and on, their faces twisted with a fanatical determination to destroy us, to wipe us out as if we had never existed. How could they be Americans? What had they been in the years before the Final War? How could this nightmare have come to our soil?

“You don’t like organised religion very much, do you?” Thomas said. “Don’t you have any faith of your own?”

“There are no atheists in foxholes,” I said, absently. “I believe in God, but not so much in those who claim to dictate policy in his name.”

Thomas snorted. “And yet you must understand that those who think that they serve as his representatives on Earth are human and can therefore err,” he said, dryly. I hadn’t realised just how involved he was in the argument, which was, in hindsight, foolish of me. “If you can take the words of the bible to support any argument you like, why shouldn’t they be wrong from time to time?”

I shrugged, too tired to even move. “But they claim to know what’s right?”

“Name me a religion,” Thomas challenged, “that doesn’t claim to have the ultimate keys to the Kingdom of the Lord in its holy book, or in the words of its priests, or in miracles witnessed by the believers. Years ago, the Pope was believed to have an absolute monopoly on truth; he was not only the guiding light for Catholics, but he had the power to indulge any sinner who confessed...”

“And made a vast donation to the Church,” I said. I’d read about that while I’d still been in school. “How could paying a vast sum of money remove the weight of so many sins?”

“Interesting point,” Thomas said. “Perhaps one could argue that paying so much and making a sacrifice is a way of recognising that you’ve been a bad boy and done wrong, and therefore setting you back on the road to redemption. Perhaps one could also argue that the weight of the sin is transferred to the Pope, as the man who indulged you, and you no longer have to carry it because the Pope accepted it freely. Perhaps...”

“It doesn’t matter,” I said, softly. “Why did the Warriors have so much success in converting everyone to their point of view?”

“Politics,” Thomas said. I blinked at him, surprised for the first time since the end of the battle and the realisation that we’d lost Mac somewhere along the way. I’d scattered pickets and search parties back southwards towards the enemy lines, but I had no illusions about our inability to stand off another attack. We couldn’t stay here for much longer. Once dawn broke, we’d have to start moving back to the defence lines and Ingalls itself. “I blame the politicians myself.”

“Because they didn’t crush all other religions?” I asked, sardonically. My experience with religions, mainly in Iraq, had led me to believe that tolerance was only a religious virtue when the religion was in the minority and vulnerable to being crushed by its enemies. Those who were superior in numbers, or firepower, tended to be far more aggressive about pushing their faith into the lead. “Perhaps we should have banned religion completely from the public sphere.”

“Perhaps,” Thomas said. “I have long believed that religion has no place in politics, but that wasn’t what I meant. Think about the last election campaign. Did you ever see one of the candidates speaking to a crowd?”

I shook my head. “I just saw one of them speaking on the television and debating their opponent by proxy,” I said, rolling my eyes at the memory. It hardly mattered now, but I’d been a loose Republican, although I had disagreements with some parts of the party’s agenda. The two-party system ensured that no one was ever completely happy with election results. We might have ended up with a Republican President who was very different from myself. “I can’t say it left a great impression on me.”

“That’s probably because it didn’t,” Thomas said. “I went to New Orleans once to hear the Reverend Brannon speaking to an interfaith conference. Now *that* was an impressive bit of oratory. He was very – very – convincing when he spoke.”

He paused. “You see, political leaders these days – I mean, before the war – didn’t actually *speak* to their audiences,” he continued. “Yes, some candidates held mass rallies and spoke to the voters, but others didn’t; after all, America is really too large to hold a proper tour and speak to everyone. You might start it when the last President is elected and you’d still be at it when the next one was elected.”

“Having discovered that you didn’t win the nomination because you weren’t sucking the right people off in Washington,” I said, bitterly. “I don’t understand your point.”

“People didn’t have any particular respect for their leaders,” Thomas said. “The President and his advisors spoke in soundbites, or read out carefully-scripted speeches that managed to sound artificial. Washington – political Washington – was another world. You’ve been here

long enough to know just how clumsy Washington was when interacting with farmers, Ed; you know how determined the Constitutional Convention is to prevent a repeat of that particular series of events. The people of America were becoming increasingly divorced from their political leaders. There was no...intimacy between the government and the people.”

I nodded slowly. “Take Hitler,” Thomas continued. “The man was a loser at pretty much everything he did. His program should have been a complete flop. Instead, he managed to take the gifts he does have, including the ability to speak to a crowd and make them believe in him, and turn it into a power base. The man was a natural politician and, when given the chance to take power, does it in a manner that has half of Germany loving him, rather than fearing him. He told them what they wanted to hear. He told them that Germany was the victim, not the victimiser, and gave them targets for their rage. The Jews, the Slavs, the British, the Russians, us...he worked them, played them like a harp. They would die for him.”

“And far too many did,” I agreed.

“But Hitler wouldn’t have gotten anywhere without the economic problems and the general lack of faith in the government,” Thomas said. “That gave him an opportunity to bring the people onto his side. That doesn’t happen here, not in America. The President couldn’t convince people to follow him, to trust him; after all, he was just another scheming politician. People have – had – very little respect or trust in their government. Every issue of the day, from abortion, to affirmative action, to the demand that slaveholder descendents pay compensation, to Weapons of Mass Destruction, only served to isolate the government from the people further. There was no accountability and so there was no trust. There was a growing void in people’s souls.

“Hell, why do you think the spread of radical religions was growing all over the world?” He asked. “People didn’t have anything to believe in.”

I nodded, slowly. He was right, in a sense. The spread of radical Islam though the Middle East had been aided by economic problems and a complete lack of government accountability. We tend to think of Saudi Arabia as rich – and indeed the Government has enough money to bankroll thousands upon thousands of parasite princes, let alone buy the latest in American military hardware – but the wealth comes from oil. When the oil runs out, so will the wealth - and the people loathe the government. The spread of radical Islam should have been expected. It had even spread into Europe...and hell, we’d had all kinds of fringe groups, just like the Warriors of the Lord.

“And think about how it was just after the bombs fell,” Thomas pressed. “We had Ingalls – and you – and we were able to cling together. Think what it must have been like for the people in the cities; wounded, helpless, fleeing into the countryside desperate to reach shelter before it was too late and they died. They had nothing left, not even their faith, and the Warriors would have taken advantage of that. Their destitution would have bred acceptance of the Warrior Creed very quickly and convinced them to follow them anywhere. I bet you that the Prophet – the false Prophet – holds mass rallies for them, exploiting them into believing that he is the true leader of the faith. You can’t overthrow a man like that, Ed. You just have to remove him.”

I lifted an eyebrow. “Are you advocating violence, Reverend?”

“Many of the young men here are from Ingalls,” Thomas said, angrily. He wasn’t angry at me, but at the Warriors. “I knew them personally. Some of them were very good, some of them stole from time to time, but none of them deserved to be wounded, or to risk death in such a battle. I wonder, now, if the false Prophet is the antichrist, sent her to tempt us into falling into the hands of Satan. He is certainly diabolical in his actions.

“If you can kill him, Ed, take the shot,” he concluded. “He must not be allowed to remain alive. He’s a genuine leader-type, with a genius for building a false religion that has him at the top, and removing him is the only way to break them. They have to be shown, in no uncertain terms, that he was a liar who led them to destruction. The only way to do that is to kill him.”

“True, I guess,” I said. I wasn’t that willing to think about it, not now, but he was right. It had to be done. Fanatics couldn’t be beaten, only killed, as long as they believed in their cause and certain victory. The key to beating them was either to wipe them out, root and branch, or break their faith in victory, forcing them to come to terms. It wouldn’t be easy. We didn’t know *that* much about the Warriors of the Lord. If I sent someone south to assassinate the Prophet, how long would it be before they found him...and could they get through his guards without being detected?

I felt a wave of surprisingly hot anger. “How could this have happened in America?”

“This isn’t America,” Thomas said. My head jerked up in surprise. “America died when the first bombs started to explode and society disintegrated. The Government is gone, the army is gone, and the police and all the other emergency services are gone. Whatever comes out, rising from the ashes, will be very different to what went before. It might be called America, but it won’t be *our* America, not the one you and I grew up in and served during our adult lives. What happens here, Ed, will determine whose vision will dominate the land we once called America in the future. Ours, one of democracy and local government, or that of the Warriors of the Lord and their false Prophet. We have no choice, but to fight them.”

“Yeah,” I said, pulling myself to my feet. It took an awesome amount of effort to move myself, but I had the feeling that if I stayed sitting on the ground, soon enough I wouldn’t even be able to move. Sleep called to me with all the temptation of a naked and waiting lover, but I couldn’t allow myself to sleep. Was this how General Franks had felt, or all the other commanding officers I had known during my career; had they all cursed themselves when the dead and dying started to come back to the field hospitals? I’d lost, in one day, more people than they had lost during the opening days of the war. “We have to fight, don’t we?”

“Yes,” Thomas said, firmly. “You know the alternative.”

Yes, I thought. The refugees and escapees had been quite clear on that point. If we surrendered to the Warriors, or lost the war, they would break us down and rebuild us in their image. Their control would be absolute and they would have all the time in the world, unless they ran into someone else even bigger than they were. I had wondered, staring at a map of the former USA, where else might have survived and given birth to a new society. Utah

might have birthed a Mormon society; they'd believed, firmly, in preparing for disaster. Where else? Texas? Kansas?

I watched as Thomas nodded to me and headed off to offer what words of comfort he could to the wounded men, and then headed outside myself. The air smelt vaguely of burning ash from the fires, but it was clear enough to allow me to take a few breaths before I walked around to the vehicles. They were grouped at one end of the warehouse, some of them still intact, others with bullet holes punched right through them, and...

Mac, I thought, and felt myself go weak at the knees. My best friend, my comrade, my ally, my...and he was gone. My memories rose up and mocked me, remembering our first meeting in the hospital after I'd been wounded, our joint missions into various bars and seedy dumps to pick up girls, his offer of a new job and a new purpose when I was told that I would have to retire from the Corps...and his welcome to Ingalls when I finally arrived. He'd thought of me when I needed a new purpose in life...and he'd saved my life, more than once. I couldn't even go back to Ingalls and face his family, or his girlfriend, but what choice did I have? I wanted to know, desperately, how he'd died...or had he been captured?

Somehow, I decided, having a body would have made it easier. I would have *known* what had happened to him, but instead I had nothing. I had spoken to everyone who might have known, the men who'd been on the last vehicles to escape the nightmare, but they hadn't seen him fall. Two vehicles had exploded at the end, blown apart by missiles or maybe just lucky shots; Mac could have been on either of them. I wanted – needed – to know what had happened, but I probably would never know what had happened to my friend.

A dark shape moved near me and I reached for my pistol before the flickering campfire light revealed Roshanda's presence. The former cop looked as tired as I felt, with the same unholy light in her eyes I'd seen during training, but she looked a great deal more focused. She'd fought well during the battle, the only woman to fight alongside the men, and hadn't broken. Rumour had it that she slept with the AK-47 we'd taken off her former captors. Anyone who tried to touch her again would be in for a fatal shock.

"Don't worry," I muttered, as I stepped past her. "It's only me."

I gave Brent strict orders to wake me if anything happened, found a relatively dry and uncomfortable spot on the ground, and closed my eyes. It was almost as uncomfortable as being back in Boot Camp, sleeping on exercise, but it felt as if I'd barely had a moment's sleep when Brent started shaking me. I still felt awful, but at least my mind wasn't cloudy any longer.

"Report," I snapped. My cleared mind had suddenly suggested that we might be under attack, even though I couldn't hear any gunshots. The Warriors might have sent scouts after us to try to find out where we were hiding. "What's happening?"

Brent was laughing with delight. "We've got visitors," he said, smiling. I wondered, from his tone, if we had actually made contact with the remains of the federal government. If they'd sent an army to assist us... "Sir, come and see who's arrived!"

I pulled myself to my feet and allowed him to escort me around to the south of the warehouse. Our rearguard was dug in there, hoping to deter the Warriors from attacking, but

I had only briefly inspected it when we'd arrived. We'd been in no shape for another battle so soon. There were three figures there – and a horse, decked out in the strange Warrior garments – and I realised with a shock that I recognised two of them.

“Mac,” I shouted, forgetting my dignity and running towards him. He looked equally pleased to see me. The horse regarded the pair of us with dull unconcern. “Mac, you dumb son-of-a-bitch! What the hell happened to you?”

Chapter Thirty-Four

Wives come and go, but friends go on forever, unless they steal the wives...

-Ed's Iron Laws #23

"Easy, Ed," Mac said, hugging me back as hard as I was hugging him. "You'll have me in traction."

"What traction?" I asked. I doubted that we had the facilities to help someone who had been crushed anyway...and I wasn't crushing him that hard. "What the hell happened to you?"

"It's a long and complicated story, full of daring deeds of daring do and spectacular stunts that no one would believe a word of it if I told you," Mac said, patting the side of the horse, which regarded him with dull tolerance. It would make a useful addition to our breeding stock, if we took it back to the stables, but it looked as if it had been trained to be a warhorse. "I'd much rather discuss what happened to you and everyone else."

"Oh, there's not much to tell," I said, shaking my head in awe. All of my previous dismay had been blown away by their miraculous return to our side. "We fled down the road, reached here and set up camp. We thought that you had bought the farm, Mac."

"I hope that the girls were crying over me," Mac said, dryly. He gave me a wink that was held just long enough to make me smile. "So, you want to know the dread story of our daring commando raid?"

I nodded. "Well," he said, as I escorted them both into the warehouse, "I found myself being taken prisoner by the goons, so I leapt into the air and found that I could fly. I came down amongst them, snatched up Dutch and this rat bastard here" – he snapped the third figure, who glared at him with incoherent rage – "and flew back towards Ingalls. When I got halfway, I found that my flying powers were fading, so we landed, picked up Trigger here and rode the rest of the way. Great story, huh?"

I had to laugh. "And the truth?"

"How dare you not believe my lies?" Mac demanded. "It's all true, apart from the lies..."

"Which is most of it," Dutch put in, unhelpfully. "In fact, only one of those statements was true."

Mac shrugged. "All right," he said. "I found myself being taken prisoner, where this rat bastard identified me as one of the leaders of Ingalls, and ordered me to be tortured. They tied me up in a chair and sent in a hundred naked women to start torturing me with great enthusiasm, but I convinced them that I really suffered every time they sucked me off, so I screamed every so often to convince them that I'd actually been telling the truth. Finally, I told them a few lies, but the men didn't believe me and sent in male torturers with the branding irons. It was then that I decided that I'd had enough."

He paused, dramatically. "I broke out of my chains and snatched up a sword, waving it in the air and shouting a battle cry into the air," he continued. "Instantly, I felt myself transformed into a barbarian hero with muscles on his muscles, so I knocked the torturers out and smashed

through the tent, where I saw Dutch being lowered slowly into a bowl of boiling water. I think they were going to have him for lunch.”

“I would have given them indigestion,” Dutch said, deadpan. “And what happened after you woke up?”

Mac ignored this. “Naturally, I would have saved Dutch at once, but I was slightly distracted by a set of hot babes in underwear, so I spent about an hour making out with them, ignoring Dutch’s increasingly loud screams until it was almost too late to save him. I leapt into the boiling water myself, punched my way out of the bowl, and saved him in the nick of time. I then grabbed a horse, transformed it into a winged beast like Pegasus, and captured this bastard before we flew out and back here.”

I frowned. “Shouldn’t it have been a unicorn?” I asked, finally. “I think that that would have suited you better.”

“He’s on to you,” Dutch put in. He grinned, suddenly, rubbing his arm. I gave him a quick once-over and saw the bruises. Whatever else had happened, he had been badly mistreated by the Warriors. “Yep, you definitely qualify for riding a unicorn.”

“Fuck you,” Mac said, affably. I laughed. The general qualification for riding a unicorn was virginity. I knew that Mac was no virgin. “You want the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth?” I nodded. “Well, *you’re* not going to get far.”

I rolled my eyes. “All right,” Mac said. “The truth…”

“I climbed onto the side of the last vehicle as it prepared to leave the FOB for the redoubt here,” Mac began. “It might have been a bad choice, because bullets started to whip through it seconds later and nearly took off my balls.” He laughed. “A target like my pair. How could they miss? A second after that, the entire vehicle shook and I fell off the side, which saved my life as it exploded a second later. I was badly stunned for a few seconds and lay still; the Warriors who searched the wreckage, looking for any survivors, missed me. I crawled in the direction of the pond as darkness started to fall and finally managed to get enough water to revive myself, along with the candy bars.”

“Good thing you had those with you,” I said. Mac had stockpiled a few dozen different types of candy bars, all his favourite types, and guarded them jealously. I had stockpiled a few myself, but I’d almost finished them when we made first contact with the Warriors of the Lord. “And then what happened?”

“They were sending pairs of searchers around to pick up everything they could, including the bodies,” Mac continued. “I don’t know if they were actually eating them, as I joked, but I lay still until the searchers came up to me, and then went after them with a knife. The poor bastards didn’t stand a chance. I took the pair of them out before they could raise the alarm, confiscated everything they were carrying that might have been useful, and stole their clothes.” He nodded at the outfit he was wearing, a drab collection of greens and blacks, rather like a civilian’s idea of a military uniform. “This is the uniform of one of their lower level soldiers.”

I smiled grimly. Mac had high marks for knife fighting and was deadlier with a set of knives than many men were with assault rifles. The Warriors of the Lord wouldn't have known what had hit them until it was far too late; I had a vision of Mac sneaking through their encampment, wearing their colours, killing as he moved. He'd be caught, of course, in the end, but holding him would be difficult. He had also aced the escape and evasion course...and had actually operated undercover in very alien environments. The Warriors, for all of their fanatical certainty in their rightness of their course, didn't have half the resources of the Iranian government when it came to population control. I doubted that their senior officers knew all of their juniors by sight.

"Anyway, I wandered around for an hour, watching everything I could without drawing unwelcome attention," Mac said, smiling slightly. "I didn't dare pick off a few of their other officers, until I realised that they had a small collection of prisoners from the rearguard, including Dutch." He nodded at Dutch. "They also had them under guard by a pair of incompetent assholes in silly black SS uniforms so I took them both out within seconds. I doubt that the *Waffen-SS* would have tolerated such nincompoops in their ranks. I killed them both quickly and quietly and smuggled them both into the stockade."

He sounded pleased with himself, I saw, and it was clear that he had reason to be delighted with his own performance. "I freed Dutch and the other five and they stole their uniforms. We were just getting ready to leave when this rat bastard" – he nodded towards their prisoner – "arrived with a pair of guards and a bunch of sadistic instruments of torture, or sex toys. Looking at them, it was hard to tell the difference and judging from the expression on his face, he found it hard to tell the difference as well. We took him prisoner and put the guards in the stockade and, holding him at gunpoint, forced him to take us to the horses. We'd just gotten Trigger here saddled when someone raised the alarm and we had to run for it."

His face darkened. "Two of the men chose to stay behind and hope to blend into the Warriors as later agents of retribution," he said. "The rest of us ran as they came boiling after us, shooting at us...luckily, as the targets, we were the safest people in the area. We lost the other two along the way. They both volunteered to try to hold them off long enough for us to get this bastard back to Ingalls. I think we should ask him a lot of very pointed questions." He shrugged. "The rest you know."

I bent down to examine their prisoner. He had once been a very fat man. I could see the telltale signs, even though he had been on a forced diet for the last few months, and he positively radiated moral corruption. Perhaps I was imagining it, but I was sure that I could see the darkness in his soul, a sense of pure evil and depravity that hung around him like a stink. His piggy eyes glared up at me, trying to give voice to words that wouldn't escape the rag stuffed into his mouth, making it hard to breathe.

"I think that he's definitely one of their senior leaders," Mac said, glaring down at his captive, who glared back at him. A real hard case, I decided; someone who really believed in his Cause, or at least in his divine right to do as he pleased. He might break easily, with the right sort of pressure, or he might refuse to break for hours, even under the worst pressure that we could devise. "Everyone allowed him to lead us down to the stables, even though the merest MP would have sensed that someone was badly wrong; hell, boss, they were scared to death of him."

I nodded slowly, watching the piggy eyes as they tracked back to me. A sociopath-type personality, then, one that would never be allowed to reach high levels under normal circumstances. He acknowledged no limits, no restraints on his power, and now that law and order was just a memory, had the ability to snatch as much as he could from the crumbling world. Prophet Zechariah had found an excellent servant, just as Hitler – I remembered Thomas’s lecture and winced – had found one in the unprepossessing Himmler or Ribbentrop. He would probably have plans to overthrow the Prophet, one day, but until then he would be the most loyal and craven person in the Prophet’s force.

I came to a decision, one that I hated.

“Brent,” I called, sharply. Brent came running over at once. He looked just as pleased to see Mac as I was; Mac had been popular among the army, even though some had called him a slave driver behind his back. I didn’t care; easy training, hard mission, or vice versa. It wasn’t a real choice for anyone with a commitment to building a real military. “Detail off a platoon and one of the trucks to transport this piece of shit to Stonewall. Once you get there, inform Richard that he is to be kept in solitary confinement and on full suicide watch; I want him strapped down, unable to move except until full supervision. He’ll know what to do.”

“Yes, sir,” Brent said. He looked past me at Mac. “May I say, sir, that it’s good to see you again?”

“It’s good to see you too,” Mac said, wryly. “Now, you have your orders, so get on with them. We’ll have a proper party to gloat over my...”

“Our,” Dutch put in.

“Great escape later,” Mac said. He winked at me. “We’re going to need something to keep our morale up after this.”

I grinned. “It’s good to see you back,” I agreed. “I missed you.”

“I’d take another shot, if I were you,” Dutch said. We shared a laugh. “I’d better get back to my people. Once Mac’s story starts being told, everyone will think that he took on and defeated the entire army of Warriors on his own, without any back-up at all. Next year, we’ll discover that he did everything, without any help from us, and that he has an admiring horde of teenage groupies who do everything he tells them to do. A century from now, he’ll be...”

“Arrested for strangling a fellow officer if he doesn’t shut up,” Mac said, wryly. His voice darkened. “Ed, they did have teenage love slaves at the FOB, serving some of their soldiers. I saw some of them being forced to...service some of the men, those who survived the battle, in any way they wanted. Whatever these bastards are, Ed, they’re not religious at all. They’re monsters.”

I shuddered inwardly. The needs of most men are basic. They wanted sex and security and the Warriors offered both. The system might end up being run by a group of hypocrites who didn’t believe in the faith, but were adapt at promoting it, by any means necessary. It was oddly comforting, in a way, to know that the Warriors would probably go that way. Every other religion on Earth had gone the same way.

"I know," I said. "Dutch, go get medical attention and then see to your men. I'll debrief you later on what you saw while you were a prisoner."

"Yes, sir," Dutch said, touching his head in what could charitably be called a salute. "I'll see the nurses at once."

I watched him go and then turned back to Mac. "For God's sake," I said, rolling my eyes. "Don't do that to me again."

Mac smiled. "Don't do *what* to you again?"

"You know what I mean," I said. "I thought that you were dead! I thought that I had abandoned you to your fate! I ran in the damned convoy and all I could think of was '*brave Sir Robin turned about, and gallantly he chickened out*'..."

"Bravely taking to his feet," Mac put in, "he beat a very brave retreat."

"You introduced me to that," I said, angrily. He had, too. His fondness for British television had kept us both entertained while we'd been in hospital. "I thought I'd left you behind."

"You care too much," Mac said. "You'd make a lousy General."

"I had noticed," I snapped. "Mac..."

"Listen," Mac said, firmly. "I went into battle knowing the risks as much as you did, maybe more. I knew that I could get killed back there, or if not there, somewhere else. I knew the dangers and I went to do it anyway. You know that as well as I do. I took the risk of sneaking around their encampment because it had to be done; you left me, also, because you had no choice. If you had stopped to pick me up, you would have lost the remainder of the convoy and the entire force. As it happened, you saved them to fight again. Honestly, Ed, you can't carry the whole weight of the world on your shoulders."

"I know," I said.

"Good," Mac said, and clapped me on the shoulder. "Let's go inspect the survivors, shall we?"

The interior of the warehouse was coming alive as the soldiers picked themselves off the floor and stood to attention when Mac entered. As I might have mentioned, he was popular and had been sadly missed when he had been reported missing. The wounded looked as if they wanted to stand up as well, but the nurses told them firmly to remain lying down. Some of them were within their power to heal, but others would never recover without the use of a proper hospital, which we didn't have. Kit would be able to do something for some of them, but not for all of them. In Iraq, we'd been able to do amazing things for soldiers who hadn't been killed outright, but now...now, we were back in the days of the First World War. The living might envy the dead.

"We can't stay here, of course," Mac said, afterwards. I nodded in agreement. The redoubt was useful as a rendezvous, but it didn't have half the natural defences of the FOB the

Warriors had booted us out of, although with heavy casualties. We couldn't have held it without more weapons and supplies. "We may have to pull all the way back to Ingalls."

"Or Stonewall," I said. The prison would be easier to defend, but if we were trapped there, we were screwed. There wouldn't be a second escape under fire. The Warrior rank and file might have been composed of fanatics, but the leaders would probably learn from experience. "I don't know how long we can hold out, Mac."

"Depressed, Ed?" Mac asked. He frowned at me, genuinely concerned. "That's unlike you. Are you sure you're feeling all right?"

"We don't know enough about the Warriors," I said, grimly. I didn't want to think about what we'd have to do, but we didn't have any choice. Kit was going to hate me. So was pretty much the entire population when – if – they found out about it. "Now, however, we have someone who does. It's time we asked him a few questions."

Chapter Thirty-Five

What's one to make of a politician, one who has experienced torture personally, to all appearances a decent and brave man, who can say in one breath that "People will say anything under torture," and in the next say, "Torture doesn't work"? He's either dishonestly pandering to the crowd (Am I being redundant by saying 'politician' and 'dishonestly pandering to the crowd'? I suppose I am.) or he's too dumb to realize that, if torture's that bad, and with a modicum of ability to spot-check for truth, the victim of torture will also tell the truth rather than risk more torture. One has to wonder about the fitness for high office of such a man. I mean, really? It's being neither cleverly dishonest nor honestly stupid.

-Tom Kratman

"I want it noted," Kit said, "that I don't want to be here."

"Duly noted," I said, tightly. I didn't want to be here either. I didn't like Stonewall under the best of circumstances and the Maximum Security Wing was one of the most unpleasant environments imaginable. I wondered if Kit could sense the ghosts of those who had died – who I had had killed – here. I could have sworn that I heard something whispering right at the limits of my perception. My imagination always plays up when I've got something to do that I'm not looking forward to doing. "I don't think we have a choice."

"That's not your decision to make," Kit snapped, more angry than I'd ever seen him before, even when someone from the Constitutional Convention proposed that homosexuality be made illegal. "I am a Doctor, sworn to help the sick and injured, not to watch as someone is...hurt."

"Be grateful that you don't have to do it," Mac said, dryly. "I do understand your reluctance to take part, Kit, but we don't have much choice. We need the information locked inside our friend's brain and he's not going to give it to us if we wipe his bottom with silken sheets and provide him with a concubine to share his bed."

I nodded once. I'd had to go through a course on prisoner interrogation and, truthfully, we might achieve better results if we had had no time limit and could break him down gradually. Making friends with him, as some terrorist interrogators had done, could lead to all kinds of interesting developments, including a new double agent. It could – and had – also lead to the intelligence services being hoaxed by the enemy. Stockholm Syndrome worked both ways.

But we didn't have time to be gentle. By my most optimistic estimate, we had less than a fortnight before the Warriors of the Lord restarted their advance towards Ingalls...and the centre of our new government. None of that time would be wasted, but it was hardly long enough to make Ingalls utterly impregnable...and even if they couldn't get into the town itself, they could seal us inside indefinitely. We would either have to launch a costly offensive against them, where they would have all the advantages, or allow them to starve us out. They might also seal us off and destroy the other Principle Towns instead. We needed intelligence and I was past caring about how we got it. We just had to be careful that we weren't fooled.

"Here," I said, as we reached the final cell. It was twice as large as the other cells, for a reason that Richard had proven surprisingly reluctant to discuss, but it was large enough for our purposes. Our prisoner sat on a chair, his hands and legs firmly secured so that he could

barely move a muscle, preventing him from committing suicide. It might have been an extreme precaution, but some of the harder terrorists we'd taken prisoner had committed suicide, just to prevent us from learning what they knew. The media had promptly claimed that their deaths were due to mistreatment, as if preventing them from hurting and killing hundreds of innocent victims counted as mistreatment. "What do you make of him?"

"He's got an incredibly small dick," Kit said, finally.

"All terrorists do," Mac said. We shared a look of sly amusement. The Iraq War would have gone the other way if the terrorists hadn't gone out of their way to make sure that everyone knew just what a terrorist victory would have meant for Iraq. It would have made Saddam look mildly maladjusted. "All you have to do, Doctor, is be there if he needs sudden and urgent medical attention."

"Sure," Kit said, angrily. "How can you two be so calm about it? Are you all just mindless killing machines?"

I ignored the jibe. Under the circumstances, Kit had every right to be annoyed with us – me. Mac had other ideas. "I saw their camp from the inside, Doctor," he said. "I saw what they do with their captives, including people we have sworn to protect. They won't hesitate to kill you because of your sexuality, the same way they won't hesitate to kill Rose or Deborah for being women who know how to fight, and we have to do what we can to protect you. That...fucker in there isn't an innocent victim, or someone brainwashed into following the Prophet, but one of their leaders, one of the people who are trying to spread the nightmare everywhere they can reach. He is as guilty as they come and we do not have time to be gentle."

"Yes," I said. "I'm sorry, Doctor."

"Excuse me then," Kit said, "if I don't watch. I'll wait outside until you call me."

I didn't blame him. The thought of interrogating a prisoner rigorously – torture, in other words, if you don't believe in mincing words – isn't one that everyone can stand. It's not easy to construct a moral case for administering pain to a fellow human being, even with so much at stake. There are too many questions that need to be answered, starting with the simplest of all. Did we have the genuine criminal, or did we have someone we'd picked up by mistake, innocent of any crime? The only reason, or so I told myself, that I was accepting the need for torture was because I knew we had a real member of the enemy leadership. There was no risk of making an innocent man suffer.

We stepped into the cell and the captive's piggy eyes turned to glare at us, although there was an undertone of fear in his gaze. I was delighted to see it. A real fanatic would take longer to break down, but real fanatics tend not to reach the high levels of terrorist organisations. The Prophet might be as mad as a hatter, but I was quite happy to bet – hell, I was betting – that his senior leadership was only in it for the power. The same was true of pretty much every terrorist group that hadn't wiped itself out long ago.

"Good morning," I said, conversationally. Richard had, on my orders, meddled with the lighting a little, just enough to confuse the prisoner as to how long he'd actually been a captive. Deprived of any objective simulation – and affected slightly by some drugs we'd

injected into his system – he might well believe that he'd been there for weeks, instead of two days. "How are you today?"

I released the gag and he took the opportunity to spit at me. "That was careless," I said, and slapped him across the face. I had to pull the blow – I didn't want to inflict permanent damage yet, or stun him – but it left a satisfying mark on the side of his face. He stared at me, shocked for a moment, and then reverted to type. "We've finally gotten around to you and you really don't want to piss us off, right?"

"Right," Mac agreed, and stepped forward into the light. We had dressed him in an outfit that made him look more like a demented dwarf than a soldier, but also made him look terrifyingly evil, like someone out of an S&M movie. The prisoner's eyes went wide as he stepped into the light. Mac's hand squeezed his throat gentle, leaving him in no doubt that he could crush his windpipe just by squeezing, before letting go and forcing the prisoner to take deep breaths. "Don't piss us off."

"You can't do this to me," the prisoner protested, finally. We'd gotten through to him already, or was it just an act? I knew some terrorist groups that gave their people special courses in misleading interrogators, but I doubted the Warriors of the Lord would have bothered with such lessons. Why should they have if they knew the land was going to fall into their hands? "You can't treat me this way?"

I leaned forward, cursing an oversight. I should have swallowed something that would have given me really bad breath. "And we can't we treat you this way?" I asked, as insanely politely as I could. "You're my prisoner. I can do what I like to you."

He shrank back in his seat. "No one knows you are here, my friend," I breathed. "No one knows or cares that you survived the battle. We can do whatever we like to you and no one will even know, or care. Your fellow Warriors think that you're a dead man and someone else has already been appointed to fill your shoes. They don't care in the slightest what happens to you, not now that you've been replaced."

I had hoped that that would cause him to break, but he held on to himself. "I won't tell you anything," he said, desperately trying to avoid thinking of something that might save him. I might have overdone it a little. If he clung so hard to life, he would try to avoid telling us anything, just to prolong his existence. "You can do what you like to me. I won't talk."

"Yes, you will," I said. "Mac?"

Mac stepped back outside the door and returned, a moment later, pushing a trolley. It had a small light mounted at one end – I believe Kit used it for his night time rounds in the hospital – which was shining brightly, illuminating the small collection of metal devices on the table. They looked intimidating, more intimidating than most military weapons, but they weren't military at all. Some of them had been borrowed from Nana, the town's dentist, and were designed for repairing teeth. Others had more mundane applications.

"You can torture me all you like," he said, "but I won't talk."

"The interesting thing about torture," I lectured, as I picked up a surgical knife and held it so that the light sparkled off its sharp blade, "is that it is actually quite reliable, under the right

circumstances. Specifically, if we have a method of obtaining feedback, we are capable of knowing just when the person under the knife is telling the truth. Lying to us, my friend, will only prolong your pain, for we have other prisoners and a lie detector.”

I thought I was overdoing it a little, but his eyes went wide. The wire that ran around his head, making him look like a candidate for the electric chair, wasn’t actually anything more than extra humiliation, but if we could convince him that it was a lie detector... We didn’t have other prisoners with whom we could crosscheck, but if he believed we had, we took away his motivation for lying.

“If you lie to us, the pain will merely grow worse,” I said, calmly. I reached for his hand and smoothed it out. A moment later, I brought down the knife and cut his pinkie finger off. He screamed in pain and shock. I wasn’t in a much better state. I’d injured people before, although never so...precisely, but the finger had come off much quicker than I had expected, somehow. I passed the grizzly trophy to Mac, who put it in a shiny bowl, and held it up in front of our guest’s eyes. “As you can see, we have no compunction about hurting you.”

His eyes showed an internal struggle...and pain. A dull stink rose up from where he had urinated involuntarily. My nose twitched, but I ignored the smell, satisfied that we were scaring hell out of him. If we kept pushing him, I was confident that he would break. We could keep making him suffer for hours.

I said as much. “We can do this forever, if we have to,” I said. “Perhaps we could cut off one of your toes next, or perhaps we should start getting ambitious and cut off your nose, or pluck out one of your eyes, or maybe even your penis? What do you think of that?” He said nothing, whimpering desperately, trying to force us to soften and spare him the agony. I reminded myself about the captives they’d taken and pushed my guilt into a darkened corner of my mind. “Tell me, now. What is your name?”

Mac passed me the dentist’s drill and I held it close to his mouth. “Daniel,” the prisoner screamed. “My name is Daniel!”

I smiled, tightly. “Good, Daniel,” I said, withdrawing the drill. Carrot and stick, again, rewarding him for telling us what I’m sure felt like a piece of insignificant data. “Now...how did you join up with the Warriors of the Lord?”

He flinched back, eyes wide and staring, until I brought the drill back towards his mouth. It was an astonishingly intimidating tactic, but then, most people dread going to the dentists and having him working away inside their mouths with his drills. I’m sure Daniel – as we must now call him – sensed that I didn’t have any proper dentist training, or that I wouldn’t hesitate to drill right through the tooth and into the nerve below. He started to gibber away and I listened carefully, grateful for the recording system. We’d be able to replay it later.

Daniel – his real name had been something a great deal less religious – had been one of the early ones to fall into the hands of the Warriors of the Lord, just after the bombs fell. He talked briefly about a shrewish wife and two minor children, the former of whom had been broken by the Warrior treatment into a proper wife. His delight in seeing his enemy – I wondered, grimly, how he could see his wife as an enemy, but I suspected I knew the answer – broken had brought him to the attention of the Warrior leadership, who had promoted him and made him their loyal servant. He hadn’t been the commanding officer of the force that

had hit Summerville, but he'd been a high-ranking officer...and one who was partly responsible for the atrocities in the town.

"We have to keep the bitches in their place," he said, desperately. The temptation to inflict even more horrendous damage on him was almost overwhelming. "Man is the head of woman and a woman who seeks to live on her own is an unnatural offence against God. She must be punished and purged..."

I pushed onwards grimly. "How many Warriors are there in total?"

"I won't tell you that," Daniel said. I leaned forward with my drill and inflicted a tiny nick on the side of his gums. Judging from his screams, you'd think I had kicked him in the groin or poured acid on his head. "Thousand upon thousands; oh God I don't know any more, I don't know..."

Mac and I shared a glance. "Thousands upon thousands?" I muttered. "A hundred thousand at most?"

"It can't be much more, can it?" Mac asked. "They couldn't have fed millions of refugees for long, no matter how many old MRE packs they stored. They have to have limits somewhere."

I returned to Daniel. There was a thin trickle of blood seeping out of his mouth, spilling down towards the floor below. He looked to be in terrible shape, as if we'd pushed him too far too quickly, but I was sure we could go much further before he had a heart attack. There was so much else we had to ask him.

"Weapons," I said, firmly. "What kind of weapons do the Warriors have?"

I listened to his answer in growing disbelief, rolling my eyes at the civilian attitude to weapons. Daniel might have been a high-ranking officer, but he lacked anything reassembling a comprehensive knowledge of modern weapons. The rifles he mentioned could have been anything from AK-47s to M16s or hunting rifles. I hurt him a little more, pushing for answers, but I don't think he had them to give. He mentioned tanks and armoured fighting vehicles, but again, I don't know if he really knew what he meant. We certainly hadn't seen more than technicals and truck bombs during the Battle of the FOB.

"Next question," I said. "How did you get information from Ingalls?"

"We sent agents into the town," Daniel said. He looked completely broken, utterly shattered. I hoped – prayed – that it wasn't an act. If he had recovered enough to give us some misinformation, we were going to be in trouble. "They made contact with a few of your people and...got information. That's how they knew to take Summerville so quickly. They knew that it was going to be reinforced."

I winced. Ingalls was hardly a big city. It was hard to keep anything a secret for long and...hell, an enemy spy in the right place could be devastating. If it was someone who'd had a pre-war link with the Warriors...or might it be someone else, someone discontented? The problem was that there were too many people who were 'discontented.'

Daniel coughed out blood when I put the question to him. “Who is the spy?”

“Schneider,” Daniel said. I felt my mouth fall open. In hindsight, perhaps I should have seen it coming, but I hadn’t seen it at all. I would have thought that betrayal to the Warriors was unthinkable. “Marc Schneider.”

Chapter Thirty-Six

Remember that pride is the worst viper that is in the heart, the greatest disturber of the soul's peace and sweet communion with Christ; it was the first sin that ever was, and lies lowest in the foundation of Satan's whole building, and is the most difficultly rooted out, and is the most hidden, secret and deceitful of all lusts, and often creeps in, insensibly, into the midst of religion and sometimes under the disguise of humility.

-Jonathan Edwards

We left Kit to tend to the prisoner, watched by a pair of burly security guards from Richard's men, and retired to a side room.

"It makes sense," Mac said, grimly, once we were alone. "He might have been lying about the other questions, or didn't know what we wanted to know, but if it really is darling Schneider..."

I nodded, reluctantly. Marc Schneider had been a persistent pain in the ass ever since the bombs had fallen, despite meeting near-total rejection by the remainder of the townspeople. He'd tried to dominate the Constitutional Convention, tried to have himself appointed to higher office than anyone felt he deserved, and protested the introduction of 'communist' ideas like having a communal kitchen and even sharing some of the chores of trying to build a new farming system for us all. He had even protested the use of his property for farming purposes, despite the fact that without it, we would all be dead, including him. He was the typical loner, the person who didn't fit into the surrounding society...and his own society, the one that had given him wealth and status, no longer existed. A stronger man than Schneider would still have had problems coming to terms with his new status...and Schneider had the encouragement of a shrewish wife. It occurred to me, unpleasantly, that he and Daniel had a lot in common.

"He could have told them everything," I agreed. Schneider might have been a gadfly, but he wasn't actually stupid, just narrow-minded. He could have learned pretty much anything the Warriors wanted to know about the defences and gotten it out of Ingalls for them. It wasn't as if we had a system for monitoring what everyone was doing outside the town; hell, pretty much everyone had taken a turn at scavenging once or twice in a while. Schneider, I recalled now, had gone on prospecting missions every week. He'd even been lauded for some of the items he'd found while outside the town. "Fuck."

And, I thought silently, if he is to blame for what happened to Summerville, even slightly, I won't let him get away with it.

Mac was thinking ahead. "Do we arrest him or merely push him off a cliff or something?"

I winced. If we moved openly against Schneider, he would claim that his political enemies were trying to get rid of him, even though there was little reason for them to bother. Schneider might have put himself forward as a candidate, but unless I was much mistaken, he wasn't going to get many votes. The only way he'd win would be through the Martin Prince method, in which everyone was so convinced that the other guy would win that they all stayed home. That wasn't likely to happen in Ingalls, not with everyone watching the discussion like hawks. Still, it could turn into a political nightmare...

It got worse. The members of terrorist groups had been taught to claim that they were routinely tortured as soon as they were captured, regardless of the truth, just to cast doubt on the evidence. A full confession could be struck down just because of the merest suggestion of torture, even if the bastard had been treated with kid gloves all the way, and it was almost impossible to refute such claims. The media always loved it when the government looked bad and gleefully repeated the terrorist lies, but somehow the truth never got pushed forward. How could we convict Schneider based on Daniel's confession? Any halfway competent lawyer could have cast doubt on it. Hell, Daniel himself might have been lied to by someone higher up in the Warrior hierarchy. He might have been primed with disinformation to confuse us.

But it rang true. If it had been disinformation, why not accuse someone more prominent, in a position to do much more harm than merely annoying a few people? What about accusing me, or Mac, or Walter, or...anyone? Why pick on the town outcast? I couldn't see anyone disapproving of hanging him as quickly as possible, once we brought him to trial, and it certainly wouldn't divide the community.

"We'll go see him at first and see what he has to say for himself," I said, grimly. It was possible that we could use Schneider for disinformation ourselves, but it would require some thinking and planning. If we could lure the Warriors into doing something stupid...

We went back through the prison and up to Richard's office. "We're going back to town," I said, once we'd briefly discussed what had happened in the cell. Richard, oddly enough, had accepted the use of torture right from the start, although he had worked daily with even worse people. It reminded me how little compassion he'd shown for the prisoners we'd poisoned. "Keep Daniel secured and under guard, once Kit has finished with him. We'll have to ask him more questions later."

There was a new smell in the air as we drove back towards Ingalls, a hint of burning wood, perhaps from the Wood Gas stoves we'd set up. An engineer from Sweden had remembered the concept and, once we'd found it in a reference book, had constructed several of them to produce Wood Gas. It wasn't easy to use – it produced Carbon Monoxide at dangerous levels – but we had little choice. We'd also set up a Plasma Arc waste disposal system to produce power and other supplies. Wasn't it amazing how much you could do without Washington peering over your shoulder all the time?

Brent passed us through the defences quickly, once the guards had searched the vehicles. The workers had expanded the level of defences enough – I hoped – that even a mass human wave attack would get hopelessly bogged down and torn to ribbons. We weren't interested in playing games either. The first sign of any vehicle and we'd hose it down with machine gun fire, just in case it was another truck bomb. If we were really lucky, we might even detonate it in front of their forces, instead of ours.

"Look, boss," Mac said, pointing towards a shape hanging in the sky. "They've finally managed to get the balloon up in the air."

I smiled. The hot air balloon design actually came from the Civil War, although it had been improved slightly by people with an extra hundred and fifty-odd years of experience with metals and plastics. It hung in the air, manned by three observers with binoculars, linked to the ground through a telephone cord. They could observe anyone approaching the town from

a far distance – well, certainly any large groups of men or vehicles – and sound the alert. I just wished we had two of them. There would be an interruption in their observation when they were hauled down to change crews. After one embarrassing incident, no one even walked under the balloon.

“Yep,” I said, my mind elsewhere. “We’ll get far more warning this time.”

Marc Schneider’s house was on the north side of town, larger than he and his family actually needed, or had ever needed. It had been built by a merchant who’d lived in the town and been part of the community, but he’d lost it to the banks when he became overdrawn and it had been put up for sale. The townspeople had resented, fiercely, not being allowed to bid for it themselves, but there’d been no point in complaining. The banks could have outspent all of Ingalls if they so chose. It had been bought by a man who’d no background in country life and no desire to learn. He had thought that his position in the city gave him status and had been surprised to learn otherwise, and bitterly resented it. That, more than money or safety, might have been what had led him to betray us all.

“Ed,” he said, when he opened the door. He looked surprised to see us, but unafraid; he might well have jumped to the conclusion that I had arrived to beg him to join the new government. He’d probably got a ‘reluctant acceptance’ speech plotted out already. “What can I do for you?”

I suppose I should have handled it gently, but I was in a murderous mood. “In,” I said, and pushed him into his hallway. Mac followed and closed the door behind us. Somehow, I was unsurprised to see evidence of good living everywhere. “The game is up, traitor!”

Schneider paled. “How did you know?”

I carefully didn’t smile. If Schneider had tried to bluff it out, I would have found it hard to prove anything. Hearsay isn’t really enough these days, nor should it be. His confession, witnessed by myself and Mac, would be enough to convict him.

“The Warriors betrayed you and ratted you out,” I said, watching him carefully. It was just possible that he didn’t know who he was working for, although I couldn’t imagine who *else* he could think he was working for. Salem or another of the Principle Towns, perhaps?

“They were quite happy to abandon you when they decided they didn’t need you any more. Perhaps you thought they’d make you a priest, right? They’ve dropped you in the shit and you’re not going to get out of it!”

He wilted. I took him by the arm, dragged him into the sitting room, and thrust him into an armchair that looked as if it was a hundred years old. I would quite happily have reduced it to firewood. I wasn’t particularly impressed at all. It was just a good thing that his wife wasn’t around. Chances were, she’d be unaware of his double life. I wouldn’t have trusted her with such knowledge...

“All right, now listen to me,” I said, firmly. “I can drag you out of here and put you on trial before the Town Meeting. They’ll listen to me and learn what you have done to them. When they’re finished, you’ll be lucky if you only get beaten to death by the crowd. Do you want that to happen?”

“...No,” he said, finally.

“Good,” I said. “Now, bearing in mind that I know most of the story already, tell me everything and I won’t hand you over to the mob. If you lie to me once, the deal’s off and you’re going to die. Talk.”

Schneider shook as he talked. “You kept rejecting me,” he said. “None of you would *listen* to me. You always thought that you knew best and never listened to me and...”

“Enough with the excuses,” I said, angrily. A man like Schneider would never blame himself for anything. Never mind the fact he knew little of use, never mind the fact that he expected to be amply rewarded for his time and effort, never mind the fact that he didn’t have a good history with the town, he was incapable of realising why he was being punished. Heinlein had once said that a man had to know why he was being punished before he was punished, but personally I was much less liberal. A man’s guilty; punish him, if only to ensure that justice was done. It’s not just about healing the guilty – something I tended to regard as impossible - but deterring further offenders in the future. “Stick to the facts. How did they make contact?”

“One of their representatives visited me after the Convention entered its third day,” Schneider said, slowly. I sighed in relief. At least the man hadn’t been a spy from Day One, even though that would have required pre-planning on a truly diabolical scale. “He’d seen how the Convention rejected me and offered me a position in a new government instead, telling me that I would be the Priest of Ingalls and all would bow down before me. He proved that he worked for the Prophet and told me that if I obeyed, I wouldn’t have to fear.”

I shuddered. “And you believed him?”

“What other choice did I have?” Schneider asked. “Would you have believed me if I had brought it to you?”

“Maybe,” I said. I would have believed him, wouldn’t? Or perhaps he was right and I would have regarded it as merely Schneider trying to gain more status in the community. It was just another road not taken. “What did they want from you?”

“Everything,” Schneider said, bitterly. Listening to him, it was all I could do not to jump on him and tear him apart. “They wanted everything from the number of guns in the town to maps of the defences. After the first contact, they demanded more and more and...I couldn’t stop giving it to them. I used to go out hunting for stuff and make contact with their people. Ed – Sheriff – I’m sorry.”

“Are you?” I said, feeling cold chills running down my spine. If the Warriors knew us that well...how long would it be before they attempted to crush us directly? They couldn’t leave us here for long; we might change all of the defences, or even uncover one of their other spies. “When were you meant to make the next contact with them?”

“In two days,” Schneider said. “They wanted an update on the defences and on the teams you’d been deploying to slow their advance.”

I nodded. That made a certain kind of sense. The leaders of the Warriors weren't idiots, after all, and given the terrain in West Virginia, a small number of teams could slow their advance significantly. Get in, land a heavy punch, and get out again. A handful of IEDs in the right places could make them very – very – paranoid about advancing up perfectly safe roads, let alone the interstate. A few cars pulled into a barrier would make them suspect the presence of ambushers...and, of course, the ever-present snipers. They'd hopefully be shitting themselves as they advanced towards Ingalls, fearful of every broken twig and ruined house. It was almost a pity that we'd done such a good job of clearing out the bandits.

My lips twitched wryly. *No good deed goes unpunished...*

"Right," I said, thoughtfully. "This is what you are going to do for me. You will take the plans I will provide you with to them and ensure that they believe that they're the real plans. You will take their instructions and return here, whereupon you will inform us at once of the nature of the instructions. Do you understand?"

He nodded, slowly. I believed that he would do his best to carry them out, if only because he was shit-scared of me, but it would be wise to offer the carrot along with the stick. A man like Schneider needed constant threats to keep him afraid, or his natural self-centred nature would reassert itself and push him into doing something stupid, like attempting to get back at me by warning the Warriors. It would be suicidal – the Warriors wouldn't need him any longer – but somehow I doubt he was concerned about that. He'd have his mind consumed with thoughts of revenge. I had to offer him something he wanted desperately.

"If you succeed in this mission, and if you carry it out perfectly, I won't tell the people about your treason," I offered. "You won't be able to run for political office, or try to gain wealth and power dishonestly, but at least you'll have your life and your wife. Try to betray me and believe me, you won't last long enough to run to the Warriors. Do you understand?"

I reached forward, grasped him by the collar, and pulled him upwards. "Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir," he said, shaking. "I understand. I'll do as you say. I won't tell them anything. I won't..."

"Good," I said, pushing menace into my voice. Judging from the weakness in his legs, he was on the verge of fainting. I wouldn't have cared, but it would have been hard to explain. "I'll be watching you, Schneider. Do not let me down."

I handcuffed him to the chair and we spent thirty minutes searching the house. I wasn't surprised to discover that Schneider had been keeping some items from his scavenging expeditions in his house, rather than showing them to the rest of the town, as we had all agreed upon right back at the start. It was an odd mixture of camping equipment, including some tiny stoves that would come in handy, preserved food and a surprising amount of artworks, all of which were effectively worthless at the moment. It was a mark of an unstable mind, I decided, to attach value to the worthless.

"Idiot," I said, as I came downstairs. One of his hands was darkening as the handcuff cut off the circulation. He looked as if he was desperate to escape, but didn't even dare speak. It was wise of him. I was in no mood to play games. "You could have gained all the status you

wanted by showing off what you'd found. You could have been a big man though honest work..."

I shook my head. There was no point. "You have your orders, Marc," I said, as I released him. "Fail me on this and you'll be torn apart. Remember that. You'll be torn apart by the mob."

We left him there, whimpering to himself, and went to see to the defences. The attack could come at any moment, but I had an idea, from what the Warriors had asked their spy, of their timetable. Two days...

It was more than long enough to prepare a few surprises.

Chapter Thirty-Seven

No military force can be on alert 24/7.

-Ed's Iron Law #45

"He betrayed us, then?"

"I'm afraid so," I said, later that evening. It felt like bedtime, which was weird. I must be getting old. Either that, or I was getting used to sharing a bed with someone who was more than just a casual acquaintance. "He could have told them pretty much anything they wanted to know, everything about us and the defences. He must have warned them in advance that we were going to move down south to reinforce Summerville..."

Walter shook his head, one hand wiping his glasses on the side of his shirt. He looked more like a schoolteacher than before, at least to my eyes; the task of governing an entire town was wearing heavily on him. He also looked older, but that was nothing new. We all looked older than we had been before the war. None of us had ever had to work so hard in our lives, even the veterans. I reminded myself, once again, that I had volunteered to join the Marines. No one had volunteered to survive the Final War.

"I can't believe it," Walter said, replacing his glasses on the end of his nose. "What was he thinking?"

I said nothing, remembering the attempts Schneider had made to justify himself. All of them, in my view, stemmed from his own inability to realise that the world had changed. His past occupation was no longer useful, so he had no choice, but to abandon everything he'd learned and move on to a new speciality. He'd resented that bitterly; ironically, he'd probably been one of the best scavengers we'd had. If he had developed that instead of making contact with the Warriors of the Lord...

But there was always someone who saw themselves as an outcast from society, or as a lone voice crying in the wilderness, or as someone who had been constantly shit on during their lives. Their insecurities might have had no basis on fact – I remembered how many of Moe's victims had simply taken it and hated him silently – but they existed and a skilful spy could take advantage of them. Schneider had been groomed to serve as the perfect spy, promised control of Ingalls after the Warriors occupied it, and his own desire to be a Big Man had done the rest. I suspected that the Warriors had lied to him – Schneider was hardly a religious person – but he had believed otherwise. He probably hadn't even thought that it might be a deception.

"I guess he thought that he had no stake in society," I said, and looked over at Jackson. "I trust that the spies are watching him now?"

Jackson nodded. We'd deputed a handful of other people in the early days after the war, just so that we could try to keep a lid on any panic or unrest before it turned violent. Some of them hadn't really come into the spotlight – they hadn't been needed, after all – but they were now serving a useful role by keeping a close eye on Schneider. He had been asked to take the next batch of intelligence to the warriors, so I'd make sure that the intelligence they got was...rather untrustworthy.

Jackson raised a point that had been floating about in my mind. “Can we trust him not to betray us to the Warriors when we meets them?” He asked. “It’s not as if we can risk having one of the skirmish groups ‘accidentally’ stumble over them while he’s passing on the information.”

“I think we can trust him that far,” I said, slowly. We had his wife, after all, and she would not be allowed out of the town. She might not even have known about her husband’s betrayal. I had a suspicion that Schneider might seriously consider leaving her behind if we made the threat more overt – I wouldn’t have slept with Mrs Schneider if she’d paid me to do it – and in any case, life without her would be delightful for the bastard. We would just have to hope that he was too scared of us not to consider defying my orders.

“Nothing in war is certain,” Mac said, before Jackson could pick away at my statement and realise how weak it was. “We know from the reports from Biggles and the skirmish lines that the Warriors are on the march and will be here soon enough, within the next few days at most. Now they’ve started to fire on Biggles whenever they see him...”

I nodded. One of the chemists had had the bright idea of mixing up some napalm and dropping it on any large batches of Warriors. The first two explosions had been dramatic and very effective, as had the raid on what was obviously a Warrior staging post, but then the Warriors had started to fire on Biggles every time they saw him in the air. The aircraft had been damaged several times when stray bullets had passed through the fuselage and I had forbidden Biggles from taking any other risks. We couldn’t afford to lose the only aircraft we had to damage, even if Biggles managed to fly back home instead of coming down in flames.

“That brings us around to the evacuation plans,” Walter said, firmly. “Do we really have to start moving the wounded and children now?”

“Yes, sir,” I said, equally firmly. “We cannot afford to keep them in the town much longer, or they’ll be trapped here when the Warriors surround us and lay siege to the town. I’d be happier with the women out of the way as well, but they’re going to be needed if the Warriors break through the defence lines. I’ve rotated as many of them to Stonewall as I can and pulled out some of the male guards, but that has its own risks.”

“Yeah,” Jackson agreed. “The prisoners might break out and stab us in the back.”

“I’ve left orders for Richard,” I said. “When the Warriors get a day or two closer – you never know, the skirmishers might hold them up for a week – the prisoners will be returned to their cells and placed firmly into lockdown until the end of the battle, whatever happens to the town. I imagine that if we lose, the Warriors will go after Stonewall and try to crack its defences...”

“How many of the bastards are there?” Walter asked. “They’re throwing away their own lives as if they were nothing, not even to them.”

“I don’t know,” I said, sourly. Our captive, Daniel, hadn’t been able to shed much light on that, even though the first thing I would have wanted to know about a force under my command would have been how many men it actually had. His answers had been vague, although judging by his remarks, I estimated several hundred thousand at most. The more

hyperbolic statements I dismissed. The Warriors couldn't have over a million at most...and even that was extreme. They certainly couldn't have ten *billion* under their banner. There hadn't been ten billion people on Earth before the Final War, let alone after it. "If they don't change tactics, we have the perfect opportunity to batter them into a bloody bleeding mass and crush them utterly."

"Or we could retreat," Walter said. "There are folks who want to do that and just leave the town."

"Traitors," Mac hissed. "They should be arrested and publicly humiliated for wanting to surrender to the bastards. Haven't they heard the reports out of Summerville?"

I shook my head. "Walter, I doubt that they meant a word of their offer to let us leave," I said. "Even if they did mean it, we would be alone and isolated in a very hostile world, without even the shelter of the Principle Towns. If they came after us – and they must, because we bear the contagious disease of freedom – they'd wipe us out completely, taking the women and children as their slaves."

"I know," Walter said. "Ed, I'm not the one you have to convince."

"Yeah," I said. The Constitutional Convention had dispersed yesterday, but not without voting a resolution to carry on the war against the Warriors of the Lord until they were utterly crushed, deeming them to be completely incompatible with the American traditions of freedom, democracy and justice for all. It was a refreshing change from the hand-wringing of various pre-war presidencies, but even so, a victorious war could prove almost as disastrous as a lost war. The victor in the war might wonder just what he'd won when their numbers had been reduced so sharply. "I know."

Walter yawned suddenly and several others followed him. "I think it's time we all got some sleep," he said, standing up and brushing down his suit. It wasn't very practical garb for the town – not least because he was wearing an enormous pistol at his belt – but he'd refused to trade it for something more durable, apparently under the theory that a Mayor should wear a suit at all times. "Everything will look better in the morning..."

I rather doubted it – we couldn't run any aerial reconnaissance in the darkness, which meant that the Warriors would probably be advancing their forward scouts closer to the gates – but he was right, we all needed some rest. He chased us all out of the Town Hall, ordered the guards to ensure that none of the government members got back in until morning, and headed off to his own house at a swift trot. I smiled, waved Mac goodbye, and started to walk back towards my own house. I would have been happier with something smaller, but it had once belonged to a man from the city who'd never made it out of New York alive – or at least he hadn't made it to Ingalls – and Walter had claimed that it would remind me of home. I wasn't sure that that was a good thing, but the only memento of New York that was actually present was an image of the falling Twin Towers, draped in black. The inscription underneath said NEVER FORGET. I almost choked up every time I looked at it, not because of the reminder of 9/11 – I'd been a teenager at the time – but because of how we'd seen it, before the Final War. We'd acted as if we'd been beaten half to death. Now...

Now, America was in ruins, along with most of the rest of the world. I knew enough about the missile targeting plans to have a far guess at what had happened to the Russians...and I

knew enough about the Russian weapons to have a fair guess at what had happened to Europe. My most optimistic estimate, at the time, was that the Northern Hemisphere was almost completely in ruins, while the Southern Hemisphere might well have survived intact. Would we end up with a world dominated by China and Brazil? It was bitterly ironic, but perhaps they'd do a better job of it.

"Welcome home," Rose said, from the darkness of the bed. I smiled as I saw her limbs in the semi-darkness. She was a very pale woman, but she had been looking much healthier lately, even though she had been running additional courses for the girls she taught. The news of how the Warriors treated women had fired her determination to ensure that men and women strode into the brave new world together, rather than one being firmly subordinate to the other. "We need to talk."

"We do?" I asked, through a yawn. I wanted to go to bed and yes, get some sleep. I probably couldn't have performed if three teenage nymphomaniacs had danced in, completely naked, and started to go to work on me. "What about...?"

"Light the light," Rose ordered, and I obeyed. Now that we had a regular system of coal mining established – coal harvesting, in some places – we had a regular supply of electricity, although not of electric lights. Once we ran out of supplies in town, and those that we could scavenge, we would have to fall back on what we made ourselves. It would be a long time before we took such luxuries as electric lights for granted. "Ed, have a seat."

I frowned, but sat down on the end of the bed, watching her as she sat up. It was a very distracting sight. Rose might not have had massive breasts, but I had always preferred fit girls to the oversized supermodels...and I could actually hold a conversation with her. Some of the girls I had dated had had literally nothing between their ears, but insecurities and mindless trivia. She was beautiful, in her way, but not everyone would have agreed with me. I trusted her completely.

Part of my mind told me that I'd made a mistake getting involved with a subordinate, even though we no longer had any real contact with the rest of the United States at the time, but the rest of my mind told me that it had been a great idea. That was, of course, the part of my mind connected to my groin. Legally, it wasn't a crime – it would have been had we been in the Marines together – but it was definitely borderline.

"Ed," Rose said. She sounded oddly nervous. I'd never heard her be nervous since her first year on the job. Her confidence had built up rapidly after the first pair of arrests, although Ingalls wasn't anything like a bad as some of the inner cities. "Do you remember what we've been doing for the last three months?"

"Of course," I said. My cock was stirring at the thought. We'd both had bouts of sexual frustration and the outcome had been predictable. We'd fucked in almost every way possible and some I had believed to be physically impossible. "We were having fun, all the time."

"Yes," Rose said. She hesitated long enough for me to guess what she was about to say. "Ed, I'm pregnant."

My heart skipped a beat. "You're sure?" I asked, when I could breathe again. "You're not having a false pregnancy?"

Rose gave me a look she'd learned from Deborah, a 'don't try that with me son' look.

"I'm sure," she said. "My...ah, period was late by about three weeks, so..." She blushed. "Pretty much every girl in Ingalls has had irregular periods since the war, so I didn't think much of it at first, but three weeks was a little extreme and so I went to Kit and asked him to do a few tests. He confirmed that I was pregnant, Ed, and that I was actually a month and a half along."

I blinked. "But wouldn't you have missed two periods?"

"I guess that it happened just after the end of my last period," Rose said. She paused for a moment to think. "That would have been the day when we managed to get the plasma arc system set up and everyone wanted to celebrate. We got a little drunk, and then came back here and had our own celebration. I would have liked it to be that day, although there's no way to know for sure..."

I nodded. The complete absence of contraception had ensured that pregnancy was a likely event for every sexually-active girl in Ingalls, or the remainder of the Principle Towns. It was likely to happen for the girls the Warriors held captive as well, although their fate would be far worse. Any girls they bore would wind up in sexual slavery, while any boys would end up being brainwashed into becoming Warriors. If you started to teach a child nonsense early enough, that child would grow up believing that nonsense, unable to make the kind of mental leaps that would offer freedom to the rest of the world. They would be locked, forever, into mental double-think.

"Ed, I'm pregnant," Rose said, again. "What are we going to do?"

"That's wonderful news," I said, finally. The shock had numbed me, even though I had considered the possibility. I had wanted to have kids of my own; hell, *my* kids would have a father who was always in their lives. "Rose, that's wonderful!"

She stared at me. "And what if I give birth to a monster?"

I hesitated. "Rose, there have only been seven monsters in all," I said. "A third of pregnancies have miscarried fairly early on, but the remaining pregnancies seem to be fine. They should give birth to perfectly normal healthy children."

"Kit didn't know there was anything odd about the first monster until she gave birth," Rose said. "What if..."

I reached forward and placed my hand around her shoulders. It was a warm room, but she was shaking uncontrollably. "And even if I do give birth to a normal child, what happens to her if the Warriors win the war?"

It was, I decided, a logical fear, although I doubted that either of us would survive if the Warriors won the war. Rose still commanded the female militia – the Monstrous Regiment, as some of us called it – and the Warriors wouldn't suffer her to live.

I didn't say that to her. I'm not always a cold-blooded bastard.

“Rose,” I said, slowly, “will you marry me?”

Rose stared at me. “Everyone is going to say that we got married because you got me pregnant,” she said. “I won’t have any respect left in the community.”

“Fuck them,” I said, angrily. I could hardly care less about what Mrs Grundy thought. Besides, there had been several other weddings under the same circumstances. A handful of older women had objected to them, only to be faced down by the rest of the community. “Rose, I love you. Please marry me.”

“I will,” Rose said. She pulled me to her. “I think you’d better make it quick, though. I’m not going to be a dishonest woman any longer.”

I laughed.

Chapter Thirty-Eight

Outsiders often criticize the extreme commitment of group members. But what is really happening is that leader and followers are conspiring to realize a vision that is falsified daily. For the cult is not paradise, and the leader is not God. Hence the follower is embattled; to squarely confront the many failings of the leader and the group is to call into question one's own great work. Only by daily recommitting himself can the follower continue to work toward his ultimate goal. Each follower works out a secret compromise, acknowledging some things while denying or distorting others. Clearly this is a high-risk strategy that may go awry.

-Dr. Len Oakes

“So, how does it feel to be married?”

“Shut up,” I said, not unkindly. Mac laughed, utterly uncrushed. The wedding had been a quick one, made quicker by the fact that neither of us had any family in Ingalls. Mac had agreed to serve as the Best Man and had offered, mischievously, to give the bride away as well. Rose had shaken her head and asked Jackson to serve as a stand-in for her father, who was presumed dead somewhere in the wilderness. “It feels great, thank you. You should give it a try sometime.”

“Once she gets pregnant, then I suppose I will have no choice,” Mac said, agreeably. “Is there any sign of that bastard?”

I shook my head, peering off into the distance. Schneider had taken the falsified papers I’d given him and headed off towards where his Warrior contacts were waiting for him. I knew that they were close by. Their entire army had finally pushed its way through the skirmishers and taken up position barely five kilometres away. Biggles had tried to bomb their camp with napalm, only to be driven away by machine gun fire from the ground. He’d been very lucky; they’d also expended a Stinger missile – or something – on his aircraft, which he had narrowly managed to evade. It was proof that the Warriors had built up a formidable stockpile of weapons before the war, or that they’d raided an armoury somewhere. It was probably the latter. Daniel had been delighted to boast of how many weapons the Warriors of the Lord possessed and how little chance we had against them.

“Fuck all,” I said, reluctantly. The odds were very good that Schneider had simply defected to them completely, or that they’d killed him and dumped his body somewhere. I would have bet on the latter. The Warriors of the Lord probably wouldn’t have any further use for him. We’d lost a few scavengers before, mainly to bandits or rabid dogs, and under normal circumstances, we wouldn’t think much of losing Schneider. He hadn’t been the most popular of people even before we’d discovered that he’d been betraying us. “As long as they believed the plans...”

“We’d better hope that they just killed him,” Mac agreed, grimly. A defecting Schneider could have told them that the plans were faked. I was hoping that the Warriors would attack, relying on the plans, but I did have contingency plans to handle an attack from other directions as well. “Did you get Richard briefed on his side of the operation?”

I nodded. “Yep,” I said. “It was something I kept from Schneider, just to make sure that he couldn’t betray that to the Warriors, even under torture. What he doesn’t know he can’t tell,

but we should have at least one ace up our sleeves. Let's just hope that the Prophet isn't a poker player."

"It's a sinful game anyway," Mac said, deadpan. I rolled my eyes in his direction before checking out the horizon again. The Warriors might be on the verge of invading now and, therefore, had decided that Schneider was suddenly expendable. I couldn't fault their logic. If he came back to Ingalls, aware that the assault was about to begin, he might have betrayed them to us. "He probably only plays holy games like Trivial Pursuit and Pin the Angel on the Pin."

"You're not helping," I said, shaking my head slowly. "There's nothing in view."

I stood up and started to walk back towards the CP, now heavily protected beneath a mixture of earth, concrete and sheet metal, intended to protect it from a direct hit from enemy mortars, or even light artillery. Daniel had claimed that the Warriors had heavy weapons, although his ignorance of basic weapons had been so great that it was impossible to know if we were telling the truth or not. He thought that he was telling the truth, but he had no basis for knowing if he actually was. There was little point in torturing him further without feedback.

"I've given orders that Schneider is to be let back through the defence line when he arrives – if he arrives," I said, feeling tension echoing down my back. I could *feel* the presence of the Warrior Army so close to Ingalls, a sense that hostile forces were far too close for comfort, even if I couldn't see or hear them. I'd heard some commanders talk about their ability to get a feel for the battlefield, but it was the first time I had developed anything of the sort myself. "I think, however, that we are on the verge of being attacked."

The workers had built up the defence lines to truly awesome levels. The first defence line was a simple wall, surrounding the entire town, seemingly easy to break. Anyone who broke through, however, would find themselves snared in the midst of other defences, while we poured fire down on them in pre-registered firing patterns. If they got through that, they'd hit the first inner defence wall...and the minefields covering it, along with buried IEDs and other nasty tricks. I allowed my gaze to drift over the walls, watching the soldiers and militia as they struggled to perfect the defences, knowing that many of them would die in the coming engagement.

"I made sure that all of them have masks," Mac said, grimly. "If they throw gas at us, we'll be ready for it."

"Not completely," I said, remembering the dreaded MOPP - Mission Oriented Protective Posture – suits we'd worn back when we'd been sure that Saddam had weapons of mass destruction. They had provided comprehensive protection, at a cost of being hot, sweaty and uncomfortable, but I would have sold my soul for more than a handful of them in Ingalls. There are some kinds of nerve gas that can be fatal even when touching bare skin; they don't have to be breathed in by the victim. I hoped – prayed – that the Warriors wouldn't have invented anything like that; they weren't easy to produce. If they had, however, they could kill thousands of us before we had time to react.

"I know," Mac said. Like most weapons of mass destruction, gas isn't as bad as the media makes it sound...if you have time to prepare. We had prepared as best as we could, but the

only MOPP suits in our armoury had been part of Sergeant Isaac Chang's squad. The dangers of an industrial accident, to all intents and purposes, had been why I was unwilling to risk using gas ourselves. It was very much a weapon of last resort. "Do you think that the kids will be safe?"

I'd gambled when I had sent them to Stonewall, gambled that the Warriors would see the town as their main target, not the prison. It wasn't as risky as it sounded – Ingalls would reward them richly for taking it, while the prison was useless as anything other than a fortress – but the Warriors might not be rational about it. The second danger was that the Warriors would simply lay siege to the prison, rather than trying to take it in a direct offensive. Stonewall didn't have the food supplies to hold out forever.

"Yes," I said, as confidently as I could. Stonewall featured prominently in my plans for the future, after all. If Richard had a chance, he could turn it into the key stage for defeating the Warriors, once and for all. Judging from Biggles' reports, the entire Warrior Army was on the move towards us; hell, if we were lucky, they'd even have a rebellion in their rear. "I'm certain of it."

My radio buzzed on my hip. "Sir, this is Danny in the observation balloon," it said, through a haze of static. The electromagnetic distortion caused by the nukes had been fading for weeks now, although radio communication wasn't what it had been before the war. It would be a long time before we could fully trust the system, although we had had no choice, but to rely on our most powerful sets to talk to Stonewall and the other Principle Towns. "They're on the move."

I glanced down at my watch. "Cutting it fine, aren't they?" I said, puzzled. "It's only a couple of ours until darkness."

"Perhaps they intend to assault us under cover of darkness," Mac suggested. I shrugged. It would cost them if they did. My snipers and half of my defenders were equipped with night-vision scopes. The Iraqis had never appreciated just how capable our night-vision gear actually was, but I would have expected better from anyone with real military experience. "Or maybe they intend to try to intimidate us again."

"We shot the last person who tried to intimidate us," I reminded him. Even the Prophet would have difficulty trying to convince someone to come forward to demand our surrender, even under the false cover of darkness. "Maybe they just think they can overrun us by sheer weight of numbers."

The next hour went slowly. I spent it inspecting the defences in minute detail, ensuring that everyone knew just what they were meant to be doing, and confirming that the observation balloon crew was ready to remain in the air overnight. We could – we would – replace them as quickly as possible, but if fighting broke out, we were going to need them. This wasn't going to be a repeat of what had happened at the FOB in anything, but vague detail. They could assault all three of the entrances at once, or they could concentrate on one of the gates, or they could even assault over the rough terrain and into the teeth of our defences. I hoped they would try the latter. We'd prepared all kinds of interesting surprises for them if they did.

And I gave a speech. Did I mention that I hate giving speeches? I had seriously considered borrowing some lines from Shakespeare, or even one a science-fiction show, but in the end, I tried to speak from the heart. I don't know if it worked or not, but everyone cheered...

"We are gathered here today to face the terrible threat of the false Warriors of the Lord," I thundered. "Men who will destroy our town and civilisation, men who will kill us all, rape our women and take our children away to be raised as their own. We must not allow them to break through. We *will not* allow them to break through! They think that God gives them the strength to break into our town and ravish it, but we know that our defences are strong and if they charge at us, they will break against our might."

My voice softened. "If we win this day, we will determine the future of the new America, a land free from terror and oppression, where a man can hold his head high and say that it is his land, and he will not be moved. If lose, we doom the entire eastern seaboard to permanent domination by the Warriors. They have brought their entire army to fight us...and we will break it! They will come at our defences and we will break them, and crush them, and liberate their captives from their unholy grip. This land is our land and we will not be moved!"

They cheered. I still cringe to think of my speech being performed, time and time again, in plays and movies. They have an actor playing me who looks nothing like me, a man who looks handsome, strong and yes, you guessed it, muscles on his muscles. Idiots.

I had already decided that I was going to station myself at the southern command post, CP2. That was the closest road leading down towards Warrior-controlled territory and it was the most likely one to be attacked in the opening moves of their assault. The balloon would, I hoped, keep me informed of any developments elsewhere, but I would have to trust in my subordinates to handle them while I oversaw the entire battle. I would have traded places with any of the young and nervous conscripts, or the older veterans, in a heartbeat. They didn't have to worry about losing the entire battle...and, in doing so, losing the entire town. When had America last fought such a battle? I couldn't remember.

"Here they come," I breathed, as the Warriors finally came into view. Half-hidden in the growing darkness, they were still visible, not least because of the flaming torches some of their people carried. I watched and listened carefully, hearing snatches of their words drifting towards us in the still night air. "Pass the word, Mac; everyone stand to and prepare to repel attack."

"Yes, sir," Mac said, tightly. "There's an awful lot of the buggers, isn't there?"

I nodded. Daniel might not have been too far wrong after all. There were definitely thousands of Warriors coming towards us, backed up by an entire swarm of trucks and other vehicles, including a pair of older jeeps from the sixties. They were remaining out of range of most of our weapons – the snipers could have picked off a few, but held their fire – but they were taking care. I watched as a massive bulldozer lumbered forward, taking up a point position, and frowned. What the hell did they intend to do with that?

A voice boomed out in the distance. I peered through the binoculars and finally saw a man dressed in black, standing on the top of a truck, haranguing the people below. It was a

depressingly familiar sight, one I'd seen before when fighting other radical religious idiots, and somehow I knew that that man wouldn't be leading the charge.

"We have gathered here to face the terrible threat that faces our religion," he bellowed. "Across yonder field lies the cursed army of the unbelievers, misguided fools and idiots who must be destroyed and their bodies hacked to pieces, their homes and businesses destroyed, their land salted and cursed, and a large fifty foot wall built around the area they call their territory so all that may know what happens when they assume they can break away from the True Faith!"

"Well," Mac said, into the silence, "that's us told."

I chuckled, although honestly it was more of a giggle. I'd just realised where those words came from...and it wasn't anything to do with God, any God. There had been a cult television series a few years before the war, one that had included hundreds of parodies of various other shows. The words had been stolen right from that show, although the producers, actors and writer chimps were probably too dead to care.

"The unbelievers must be destroyed! They have lost the way! They are fools and they are idiots. We must wipe them from the earth! We must crush their bones and make our bread! We must burn their homes! We must raze their cities and cast them into the oceans! We must..."

I found that I was whispering the words along with the speaker down below and caught myself, keying my radio. It was time to put an end to this. "Stacy, speak to me," I said. "Tell me you can hit that bastard."

"Easy as convincing a guy that he wants to take you to bed," Stacy said. A single gunshot rang out and the man tottered, before falling off the truck and crashing to the ground. "How's that, boss?"

"Excellent," I said, watching as the darkness kept falling across the land. It would soon be too dark to see properly. "Let's see what they do now..."

There was a brief splatter of fire back in our general direction, more random shots rather than precisely aimed bullets, but the Warriors waited for orders. That was worrying; most religious nuts I'd fought would have charged us at once, outraged by the death of their leader. A mob is only half as smart as the stupidest person in it and...well, if you're in a mob, you're not the smartest person in the world anyway. The fact that they weren't charging in a wave that it would be easy to mow down was rather worrying. It suggested that they had prepared a battle plan and intended to stick to it. That wasn't a good sign.

"They're not coming," Mac said, as darkness fell. I reached for my night-vision goggles and pulled them on, transforming the world into a curious mixture of green and red. It had been a long time since I'd used them in combat, but it was starting to come back to me. The Warrior vehicles looked bright red in the goggles, a sign that their engines were running, which suggested that they intended to use them to attack us...

“I know,” I said. The noise of someone preaching was increasing, but without the enemy loudspeaker, we couldn’t make out what they were saying. I suspected that it would be more of the same, but it could also have been assault instructions. “Mac...”

Mac swore. “Ed,” he said, “they’re coming.”

I nodded. “All stations,” I said, keying my radio. The darkness would make fighting a coherent battle harder, but hardly impossible. We could certainly track the enemy positions by the burning torches their leaders carried. “Engage at will.”

Chapter Thirty-Nine

I distrust those people who know so well what God wants them to do because I notice it always coincides with their own desires.

-Susan B. Anthony

In the night time, the Warriors were almost invisible.

In the night-vision goggles, they showed up clearly against the cooling landscape. They were much warmer than the surrounding air and their vehicles were warming still, marking easy targets for our sharpshooters. It was easy to see, through the goggles, that there was a certain method in their madness after all; the Warriors who were carrying burning torches – and were thus visible even in the darkness – were not leading a platoon of assaulting Warriors, but were running on their own. Ironically, the heat from the torches was confusing the goggles, although we were able to tune that out and react.

I keyed my radio, biting down the grin that was trying to plaster itself across my features. “Section One and Two, open fire on my command,” I ordered. “Single shots only; try not to miss.” I paused, watching as the enemy came closer, a swarm of hest signatures that were blending into one great mass. It was almost impossible, I was sure, for them to know where they were going – even the best NVG systems aren’t that good – and then I realised that they didn’t care. Their task was merely to seize the first wall and their orders, therefore, were just to keep going forward until they ran into it. “Fire!”

A volley of carefully-controlled shots rang out. Most of my sharpshooters, the ones I’d had equipped with night-vision gear, had had literally years of hunting experience in the surrounding area, even if they had only been taking pot-shots at rabbits. They knew just what they were doing and, more importantly, just how limited the ammunition supply actually was. They aimed for the head and, one by one, Warriors started to fall.

“We could give them a burst of machine gun fire,” Mac whispered in my ear. “In that kind of formation, they’d be mowed down like wheat.”

“Not yet,” I muttered back. I wasn’t entirely sure why the Warriors had seen fit to open their campaign in such a manner, but I didn’t want to reveal one of my surprises yet, not when it might prove decisive. The machine gun nests should be completely invisible to them until they actually opened fire. “Tell them to hold fire and wait for orders.”

“Yes, sir,” Mac said. Another round of shots rang out as the view through the NVG sets started to flicker. The Warriors were returning fire from positions all around the town, positions they’d occupied and secured under cover of darkness. Their shooting wasn’t very accurate in the gloom – I guessed that they couldn’t have much in the way of night-vision gear themselves – but it forced us to try to keep our heads down. As a distraction, it worked beautifully. “I have reports from the other command posts, Ed; they’re repelling similar attacks from the surrounding area.”

“So we’re surrounded,” I said, bleakly. It wasn’t that big a surprise, but it meant that there would be nowhere for us to run to if we lost the battle. This wasn’t a simple FOB, or even another town, but the centre of the new government. If it fell, the Warriors would destroy, in

a stroke, much of our remaining manpower. They would destroy the remaining towns within the month. “Remind them to conserve firepower as much as possible...”

“They know,” Mac reminded me. I recognised his mothering tone and nodded slightly. I had been overdoing the redundant orders, after all, and we hadn’t trained the men to be dumb cannon fodder. The best of them would have given my old Company a run for its money. “Do you hear that?”

I listened and heard the sound of vehicles revving up their engines. A moment later, they came into view on the night vision goggles, a trio of large trucks advancing towards us. A shell burst in the sky and suddenly the entire scene was illuminated in ghostly green light, sending everything into sharp relief. I pulled off the goggles, cursing under my breath, and saw a set of trucks advancing towards the first line of defences. I hadn’t expected a star shell, although in hindsight it made a certain kind of sense. They were used by the police to hunt for missing people in certain kinds of terrain. The Warriors must have looted it from a police station. My mind refused to admit the possibility that some policemen had gone over to the Warriors.

“Hellfire,” I muttered, as the vehicles came closer. The ghostly light made it easier to see just how heavily armoured the Warriors had made them, strapping on enough armour to make them reassemble some of the weirder vehicles we’d had in Iraq, after our standard vehicles had proven to be too lightly armoured for the task. Hell, perhaps the person pulling the strings had been in Iraq as well, although I didn’t want to consider that possibility either. Soldiers are generally good people, but some had broken under combat, or snapped and done terrible things. “I doubt that we can take those out with rifle fire.”

“No,” Mac agreed. The vehicles in question had once been heavy bulldozers, with similar tracks to a tank. Shooting out their wheels wasn’t a possibility...and, judging from the armour, it wouldn’t be easy to kill the driver either. At least there weren’t any human shields, I told myself, and sighed in relief. The Warriors either rated this entire attack force as expendable – which struck me as a bit unlikely – or they’d run out of human shields, which was also unlikely. It was fairly possible that they just hadn’t decided to bring them all the way from their bases, or maybe they were worried about a rebellion...

“Maybe they are expendable, after all,” I muttered. Daniel had given us figures that, I suspected, were at least an order of magnitude too high. We’d had enough trouble feeding four thousand men, women and children. The Warriors couldn’t have hosted and fed ten thousand men, let alone a hundred thousand, could they? I didn’t care how much they’d had in the way of stockpiled food; even a full-sized LOG would have had problems feeding that many for more than a month. I doubted that they really had more than ten thousand Warriors – after all, they had to feed the women and children as well – and if they were having problems, was it possible that they’d sent the men here to die? It struck me that they would probably see nothing wrong with a high friendly body count, after all. The men would have been killed in the service of God.

I said as much to Mac. “You’d think that they would be more efficient about it,” he said, as the lumbering vehicles came closer. I could see, now, that they had dozens of warriors sheltering behind them, using them as cover from the increasingly accurate fire from the ramparts. The Warriors providing covering fire kept trying to knock our men out with sweeps of gunfire, but they just didn’t have enough firepower to force us to keep our heads

down all the time. It helped that we'd had time, now, to prepare the defences. It would take a series of lucky shots to knock out all of the first line. "They're just killing some of those men for nothing, apart from costing us a bullet each."

I nodded, peering through the goggles briefly at the dying men. Their bodies were cooling rapidly now that their hearts had ceased to push blood around their internal organs. It would take them a while to cool off to local temperature, but there was no doubt that they were dead. I smiled, despite myself; I'd once heard about a British Apache pilot in Afghanistan who had captured top secret footage of a Afghan communal shit, of all things. He hadn't known what he was seeing, at first, and had thought that they were up to something diabolical. In a sense, he'd been right...

It's rather odd where my mind will go if I let it.

But the vehicles were still getting closer. "Section One, try and take them out," I ordered, already suspecting that it would be futile. Sparks flashed in the semi-darkness – the green flare was burning out – but the vehicles came on, maybe even unaware that they were being shot at. I doubted that – if you're inside a vehicle that is being targeted, you will know about it – but they showed no hesitation. Have I mentioned that I hate religious fanatics? "Section Three, hose them down?"

Section Three was one of the machine gun nests. I watched grimly as it opened fire, sending a stream of glowing red tracer into the lead vehicle, which was now making its final approach towards the walls. I cursed, angrily. If it were another truck bomb, I'd let it get far too close. The machine gun bullets hadn't slowed it down either, or its two comrades, both of whom were spreading out to push against the wall. The only wounded were some of the Warriors who were trying to hide behind the trucks.

I swore and keyed my radio. "Section Seven, take them out," I ordered. I hadn't wanted to waste our remaining antitank weapons. We hadn't had many of them in the first place and they were utterly irreplaceable. We could reload cartages and even produce more ammunition for pistols, rifles and machine guns, but not the antitank systems, not yet. "Remove them, now!"

The lead vehicle crunched into the wall and started to push. If the wall had just been made out of piled earth, as the papers I'd given our dear spy had suggested, that would have been disastrous. As it was, it ran into the concrete blocks and lead piping we'd strewn through the wall to secure it and jammed. I chuckled to myself, despite the growing danger; it was nice to know that the attempt to mislead the Warriors hadn't failed completely. The Warriors adapted fast – for them. Their advance parties lunged forward, trying to get over the wall and into Ingalls, but the sharpshooters were too quick for them. Only one of them managed to get over the wall and he fell down into a minefield. Poor bastard. Judging from the explosion, his remains are currently flying around the Earth, or perhaps passing the Moon.

"Section Seven, engaging," I heard, as the first missile was launched. The Warrior-modified bulldozers had been armoured against machine gun fire, but they hadn't had any armour that was capable of standing up to an antitank rocket fired at close range. The delay caused by the need to get them in place had been costly, but not costly enough. I'd just had to hold the antitank weapons in reserve. "Missile away!"

The remaining two vehicles went up in a blaze of light, roasting the drivers and the men hiding behind them. I heard cheering coming from along the wall – I couldn't blame the defenders in the slightest, even though part of me felt that it was unprofessional – as the remaining Warrior infantry fell back into the darkness. The flare burned out completely and, this time, the Warriors didn't bother to launch another one into the air. Darkness fell across the land.

"We held them," Mac said, tightly, "but at what cost?"

"Report," I ordered. "Sound off by sections."

The results came in and I swore. We'd fired off too much ammunition in the battle, even though little of it had been wasted, and we'd lost seven men. It was a tiny loss, compared to the hundreds of Warriors who had been killed in the fighting, but it was still a serious matter. They had thousands of men to burn – and probably intended to get a few thousand of them killed – and we couldn't afford to lose a single person. They were all desperately needed to help us stay alive over the coming months and years. The Warriors, like all religious fanatics, just didn't care.

You see, that's the point that many on the Left seem to miss. The nations that take part in the Great Game are generally careful and conservative about how they play the game. They can't smash the board if they're losing, or launch a nuclear attack; they know that retaliation will be swift and dreadful. Terrorists and religious fanatics, however, don't care if they smash the board and believe me, it's not as easy as it sounds to wreck dreadful vengeance upon a terrorist group. We can tolerate a rogue nation far easier than we can tolerate a terrorist group, no matter how nutty or trendy their cause is...because they don't have any attachment to the world we all share. They don't care if people suffer, as long as they get what they want? You want to know something funny? Guess – if you can – who gets the worst treatment from Al Qaida. That's right – their fellow Muslims. It's amazing – and horrifying – what you can do if you think that God is on your side and everything you do is justified in His name.

And the Warriors wouldn't care if they doomed us all, them included, as long as they took us down with them.

The battle dimmed down to sporadic sniping from both sides, keeping us awake despite the hour and exhausting us. I was morally certain that some of the Warrior formations – if they actually had formations – were taking the chance to catch some rest, but we could barely take that risk ourselves. If we'd had a group of men caught napping, we might not be able to get them back into the defence line before the Warriors launched another attack. But if they didn't rest...

"Shit," I said, grimly. "Mac, pull half of the men out of the line and send them to get some rest, but tell them to keep their weapons with them. If they attack, we'll wake them up and put them back into the line, but for now we'll make sure they get some sleep."

Mac nodded once and set off to carry out my orders. He would have argued if he had disagreed – I knew that he would have done that, regardless of proper protocol, such as it was – and the absence of argument meant that he agreed, but like me, he knew the risks. There's an argument that runs that the best time to launch an attack is near dawn, when the defender

is tired and disorientated – although I always wondered if that meant that the attacker would also be tired and disorientated – and I wanted the soldiers refreshed before dawn broke. The remainder weren't being abandoned either. They would have a chance to get something to drink – coffee, mainly, from our handful of remaining supplies – eat and go to the toilet, if they needed to go. I doubted that the Warriors took such good care of their people, although they might well produce sex slaves for the men to relieve themselves before they returned to the fight.

“You need to get some sleep as well,” Mac said firmly, when he returned. “Lie down on that blanket there and get some sleep, or you won't be any good in the morning.”

“I thought that there was some...you know, authority with this position of mine,” I said, tiredly. Mac needed to sleep as well, of course, but both of us were too keyed up to sleep easily. “You shouldn't be giving me orders.”

“Authority? What nonsense,” Mac teased. “Whatever gave you that idea?”

I laughed, yawned, and found a semi-comfortable position to sleep in on the blanket, trusting Dutch to wake us up if there was any trouble. I had long ago mastered the art of falling asleep quickly when given an opportunity to sleep, but I was no longer as young as I had been and the night was far from peaceful. The Warriors did everything from shooting random shots in our general direction to launching fireworks randomly into the air, sending new and strange noises echoing out over the land. It was an attempt to keep us awake, I knew, and it was working. It was so hard to just relax and fall asleep, these days...and I knew, now, just how some of the Generals had felt during the Iraq War. They probably had developed ulcers as well.

It felt like nothing, as if no time had passed at all, but Dutch was shaking me awake as dawn started to break. The noise hadn't faded at all, but it was all noise, no action beyond a sharply unpleasant sniper's duel that had been going on for the last few hours. Patty and Stacy later told me that they'd won the duel against their evil counterparts, but they'd been pushed to the limit by a very good opponent. It was a shame that not all of the Warriors were just cannon fodder.

“Wake up,” Dutch said, grimly. “Their reinforcements have arrived.”

I shook myself, swallowed a mouthful of scalding hot coffee and pushed my binoculars to my eyes. I felt as if I'd drunk myself senseless the night before, but the sight before us made me sober up in a hurry. The Warriors had brought the full might of their army to play.

“It's the same at the other two posts,” Dutch said, grimly. “They tried to send small parties into the defences overland, but we picked them all off and killed them. This time, I think they're going to go for the direct approach.”

“Get the remainder of the defenders on the walls,” I ordered, tightly. The ground was covered with Warriors for as far as the eye could see. Perhaps, part of my tired mind wondered, Daniel hadn't been that far wrong after all. “And contact Richard. Tell him we're going to need him.”

The Warriors howled their challenge and moved to the attack.

Chapter Forty

I have no problem with religion. Except when people follow them religiously.

-Jonah Fox

This time, I realised numbly, they were playing it smarter. A dozen vehicles, ranging from a pair of massive trucks to more bulldozers, advanced towards us, while a withering hail of fire forced us to keep our heads down. I swore, watching as sparks bounced off the sides of the armoured trucks, and ordered the antitank weapons to take out the bulldozers. Our last antitank rounds lanced out and destroyed the bulldozers, along with the men crouching behind them, but the remainder of the vehicles kept advancing. Two of the trucks were riddled with machine gun fire – I allowed myself to imagine a slave carefully choosing substandard armour, just on the off-chance that the Warriors would attack someone who was armed to the teeth – and sputtered to a half, but it wasn't enough to stop the remaining vehicles. One by one, they reached the first defence line...and detonated. The resulting explosion blew a hole right through the wall. A second later, three more vehicles detonated, enlarging the breach.

They really don't care, I realised, in numb astonishment. At least a hundred Warriors had been killed by their own fucking fire and they didn't seem to care for an instant. The death toll among the previous assaults would have been enough to discourage any rational commander from repeating it, but it seemed that the Warriors were not rational at all. Using their makeshift tanks, they advanced closer and closer, while the effects of the breach forced us to defend the wall. They might have only covered a tractor or two with armour and mounted machine guns on the top, but they were terrifyingly impressive, not least because we had just fired off the remainder of our antitank weapons.

“Clever,” Mac said, examining the lead ‘tank.’ “We should have thought of that. I think they’ve actually taken a tractor engine out of the tractor and placed it in another vehicle entirely, just to give them the right structure for a tank.”

I had to agree. Every third person in the countryside has some mechanical knowledge, ranging from kids who don't want to have to pay expensive repairmen to work on their cars, to experienced former tankers and maintenance officers who want to run a quiet gas station, while building their dream vehicles. The Warriors wouldn't have had any difficulty finding people with the right set of skills to build tanks from the First World War...and hell, they might well dominate the remainder of the United States. There had to be some more modern tanks left somewhere, but God alone knew where. I had thought about sending an expedition to the USMC base at Quantico, but judging from the apparent Russian targeting pattern, the Marine Corps base had been singled out for special attention. It would be something to do later, when the war had been won and our survival was assured.

“If we get out of this alive, we'll build some of our own,” I agreed. The concept was so simple that it should have occurred to one of us, particularly the ones who had spent most of their lives studying warfare. On the other hand, First World War tanks hadn't had the firepower of their later siblings, nor the survivability. They might reach the minefield intact – which was looking increasingly likely – but there was no guarantee that they would survive the first mine. First World War tanks were historically weak on underbelly armour...and it was just possible that the Warriors had made the same mistake. “They're not going to get past the mines.”

I hoped I was right as the first wave of Warrior vehicles crept up closer to the breach in the first wall and came face to face with the second wave of defences, while trying desperately to suppress our covering fire. Their armoured vehicles might be relatively safe from our rifles and machine guns, but their soldiers didn't even have police-issue body armour, which suggested just how important they were to their superiors. They kept advancing regardless, ignoring the increasing number of their comrades who were shot down like dogs, as the tanks advanced into the minefield. There was a pause, chillingly pregnant with possibilities...and then the lead tank went up with a tremendous explosion. The shockwaves detonated other mines, sending red-hot shrapnel through the air and scything down dozens of Warriors, but the remainder held their positions.

"Section Six, you're up," I said. The Warriors were trying to funnel hundreds of their soldiers through the breach now, heedless of the danger from mines...or wire, or IEDs, or other unpleasant surprises, trying to push their way through by brute force. The better-trained ones were hanging back, carrying Mortars into engagement range, and preparing to bombard the trenches and our inner defences. "Hit them as hard as you can."

"Engaging," the reply crackled back. We'd positioned the Mortars carefully and computed all of the possible angles of attack. I hadn't predicted the exact location of the breach, but I hadn't needed to predict it to have the mortars prepared before the attack began. The operators opened fire at once and started to pound the Warriors as they flooded through the breach...and started to die in the minefield. "Shells away, sir!"

I watched, as dispassionately as I could, as the Warrior attack started to disintegrate. They might have been prepared for mines and rifle fire – hell, they'd brought along a very good counter to the latter, while the former could only work once – but they hadn't expected the mortars so soon, with such accurate fire. The shells landed amongst their lead forces and blew them into bloody chunks of flesh. The survivors hesitated, caught between the devil and the deep blue sea, and then stumbled forward blindly. They ran right into the barbed wire and were rapidly caught, pinned down and unable to disentangle themselves. Their screams were nightmarish and, even though I knew it was what the Warriors wanted me to do, I gave the order.

"Stacy, Patty, take them out," I ordered. I should have left them alive, perhaps, in the hopes that it would convince the remainder of the Warriors to give up, but the noise had been too much to bear. They died, one by one, and it was probably a relief to them, after everything they'd been through. The remainder of the Warriors kept advancing, now under the cover of their own mortars, and I realised that they were going to push through the second defence line. They had detonated almost all of the mines.

My radio crackled. "Boss, this is eye in the sky," it said. The balloon had gone up again at first light, in more ways than one. "They're bringing up more vehicles and hundreds more soldiers...and they're targeting all three gates."

I nodded, too tired to swear. The enemy strategy might have been cold-blooded and utterly ruthless, but it made an evil kind of sense. They'd pinned us down, forced us to divide our strength to defend all three of the routes into Ingalls...and forced us to expend all of our antitank ammunition. They might have problems getting the tank-like vehicles over the

mines, but if they had some left when they broke through the final defence line, we would be reduced to rolling grenades under the vehicles and praying.

“If we get out of this alive,” I said, to Mac, “remind me to get the Constitutional Convention to make it a law that everyone has to have plenty of weapons and ammunition in their homes. If we’d had a much bigger ammunition dump...”

“We would have broken the Warriors like twigs,” Mac agreed. “Should we make it legal that everyone has their own tank as well?”

“You’re not helping,” I said. The thought reminded me of an old retired Marine somewhere east who’d had his own private museum of former military vehicles, all still in working order. We’d looted a set of vehicle museums and used them to outfit part of our army, but we hadn’t recovered any working tanks. There had been a set of tanks on display, but a brief examination had revealed that – owing to safety regulations – the innards had all been removed. I just hoped that the stupid bastard who’d come up with that idea had been killed in a most horrible manner when the bombs went off. He’d doomed us all. “We may have to pull back to the town itself.”

My radio buzzed. “Another truck bomb approaching, sir...”

The explosion shook the ground, blowing both a massive hole in the defences and the Warrior ranks. It was yet another display of their fundamental lack of concern for their own people, but this time, as they swarmed through the gap, they ran into a carefully-prepared minefield. This minefield didn’t explode until they were almost at the third wall, despite the presence of strands of barbed wire and other nasty surprises, and then detonated, with every mine going up simultaneously. We’d primed it just right. They lost their legs, but they survived the blasts...if only for a given value of survived. Their screams echoed out on the air.

“Poor bastards,” Mac said. The Warriors seemed almost to be wavering, as they had before, but their leaders sent another line of fanatics into the breach before their wavering could turn to outright mutiny. The two sides duelled mortars rapidly as the next set of vehicles emerged, only to be bracketed by my mortars and brought to a half, burning merrily away. If the drivers survived the first shots, they died horribly, burned to a crisp or killed when the ammunition started to detonate. “How many of the fuckers do they have?”

I keyed my radio. “CP1, CP3, report,” I ordered. “What’s happening to you?”

“Holding them at the first line,” CP1 reported. “They’re holding back, sir; they’re just keeping us pinned down!”

“They’re snared in the second line,” CP3 said. “We’re killing them by the bucket load, sir!”

“Oh, good,” I said. That meant that the Warriors, having forced a practicable breach at CP2, were concentrating their efforts on making the hole wider and breaking through. It was almost reassuring to know that they had some limits on their manpower; as odd as it might seem, I hadn’t believed it beforehand. “Mac, we may need to go nuclear.”

Mac gave me a sharp glance. “Are you sure you want to use the gas?”

“I think we’re running out of options,” I said. The Warriors were continuing to bombard us with mortar fire and their shells seemed never-ending. Their targeting wasn’t that good, but as a distraction, it was hellishly effective. It was also killing our people behind the lines, despite our best efforts, and setting parts of the town on fire. It might even prove decisive in the long run. “Give them enough time and they’ll be through the walls and into the town. If that happens...”

“We’re fucked,” Mac agreed. Even if we drove them back out of the town, the resulting damage would finish Ingalls. “Is there anything from Richard?”

“Nothing new, but he wouldn’t have sent anything,” I said. We’d agreed on a series of communications codes for transmission, if there was a problem, but the system was limited. The Warriors would probably be listening in to our transmissions and, despite our best efforts, we didn’t have a properly secure net. “We can only hope that he’s coming as we planned.”

A mortar shell landed near enough for us both to feel the wave of heat. “I know,” Mac said. “I’ll give the order at once.”

I peered through the growing haze of smoke and fire surrounding the defence line. “Wait a moment,” I said, as a line of Warriors spilled over a wall and into one of the manned positions. There was a brief and savage hand-to-hand fight, and then the Warriors were forced back out again. “Give the order to fall back to the final line now, and then order the mortars to go to rapid fire, danger close.”

“Yes, sir,” Mac said. He keyed his own radio and started to issue orders. “They’re on their way, sir.”

I nodded. Danger close is a military term for calling in a strike – air or artillery, mainly – significantly close to your own forces. It’s not something regarded as a good idea – back during the war, you needed to get authorisation at first from higher up before you could do it – because of the risk of a blue-on-blue, a friendly fire incident. It had been chancy enough in Iraq, but far more so here, without any of the precision weapons we’d deployed in the sandbox. I wouldn’t have taken the risk, but we needed time to evacuate the outer defence lines and the only way to get that time was to hammer the Warriors silly.

The explosions grew louder and more constant, hacking away at the remains of our own defences as well as the Warriors who were swarming over them, but it provided enough cover to get our men out of the area. I watched as Warriors, stunned out of their fanatical trance by the blasts, staggered around, looking as if they were wondering what the hell they were doing there. Shell-shock had probably brought them back to their senses, but in their current state, they were not going to survive long enough to rebel against their former masters. I considered, just for a moment, trying to rescue them, but it was too late. The Warriors had sent in a massive line of fanatics, pushing through the gap we’d opened for them.

I took a long breath and keyed my radio. “Section Ten,” I said, feeling as if I was going to be sick, “you are cleared to open fire. Four shells only, I repeat, four shells only.”

The problem we had faced with deploying the gas was that deploying chemical weapons of any kind isn't quite as easy as the media makes it sound. Sure, you can pump them out of the air vents, if you happen to have air vents (we didn't), but it's a lot harder to deliver them by artillery fire. It's actually worse for biological weapons. Use the wrong delivery system and you'd end up destroying your own weapon. Section Ten had a pair of specially modified mortars and I was sweating even that. A lucky enemy shot and we'd be hosted on our own petard.

"Shells away, sir," the mortar team sent back, finally. "Holding further fire."

I watched, as dispassionately as I could, as the gas started to billow around the Warriors. We'd chosen something simple enough – I won't go into the details, for obvious reasons – that had to be breathed in to be effective. The chemists had claimed that they could produce a genuine nerve agent, one that would kill even if it touched a person's bare skin, but I had rejected that concept with horror, not least because it might be just as effective at killing us. The gas we'd produced had to be breathed in and didn't have a long life. It required a certain concentration to be effective and that wouldn't last for long. The Warriors didn't see the gas or didn't recognise the danger and kept coming forward. They died in twitching agony.

"We're going to burn for this," I said, watching their struggles. They didn't stand a chance. They didn't even have facemasks, let alone any other kind of protection. Daniel had hinted that the Warriors had gas programs of their own, but they hadn't prepared for it at all, or maybe they just hadn't rated the Warriors they'd sent against us as worth saving. How many of them, I wondered desperately, did they want to die?

The irony was darkly amusing. I'd spent part of my career trying to ensure that such weapons would never fall into the hands of a lunatic with a grudge against America or the rest of the world, and here I was trying to use them. How could I condemn Saddam, or Kim, or one of the other bastards who turned chemical weapons on their own population when I'd used it on my fellow Americans? The only answer I found, and it wasn't a very good answer, was that they were trying to kill me, my town and my people.

On second thoughts, perhaps it was the best answer of all.

"They're still coming," Mac said. I swore. The gas was dispersing already, but the Warrior preachers were still driving the Warriors onwards to battle, despite their increasingly desperate resistance. I was watching the entire Warrior movement coming apart in front of me, but it might yet take us down with it. A pair of truck bombs drove right into the gassed area and detonated, scattering the gas far and wide, dispersed too much to be dangerous. "Shit!"

Another wave of Warriors appeared, lunging at the final defence line. This was it, the final battle. My people sensed it as clearly as it did, launching every weapon they had into the midst of the enemy force, no longer caring about running dry as they struggled to kill the Warriors before they killed them. The Warriors kept coming, climbing over the dead bodies of their comrades in a desperate attempt to get at us, piling up their own dead like matchwood. It was madness, unholy madness; they were killing themselves just to bring us down with them...

“It’s been nice knowing you,” Mac said, as he unslung his assault rifle and prepared to go join the final defence. The stink of burning flesh reached us as a flamethrower did its evil work. “I wouldn’t change anything for the world.”

“I would,” I said, darkly. Mac blinked at me. “I would have brought more weapons here.”

The Warriors howled as they broke into our lines, slashing into the midst of the defenders...

And then the cavalry arrived.

Chapter Forty-One

No proceeding is better than that which you have concealed from the enemy until the time you have executed it. To know how to recognize an opportunity in war, and take it, benefits you more than anything else. Nature creates few men brave, industry and training makes many. Discipline in war counts more than fury.

-Niccolò Machiavelli

There are only two ways to defeat an army composed of fanatics; kill them all, or break their faith. We'd employed both in Iraq. An army that has a sublime belief in a certain overwhelming victory, regardless of the losses and setbacks, can only be broken by being broken of that belief, or by being annihilated. The Warriors of the Lord, I had decided after the defeat near Summersville, could be broken if we could hit them hard enough. The trick had been hitting them hard enough to break their faith in victory and their leaders.

You'd have thought that their rough handling at the FOB, their treatment of prisoners and their own treatment by their leaders would have broken their soldiers' faith in them, but they'd had terrifying lives ever since the bombs had fallen. They weren't the type of people to complain about bad treatment – it was better than trying to survive on their own, or becoming a slave for the Warriors – and hell, there were rewards. As for the treatment of prisoners, particularly female prisoners...so what? They didn't have any fear of possible future consequences, while the consequences for not joining in the mass rapes and punishment sessions would be severe. It was one of the many reasons why the idea of an overarching legal code to cover warfare was doomed from the start. There was nothing that a vague future court could threaten the soldiers with that could contrast with their suffering in the here and now. Alone, placed in extreme danger, they did as they were told and didn't worry about the rightness of their cause...and, after all, if they won the war, they would write the history books. I never liked the theory of war crimes anyway. The war criminal is only a war criminal if his side loses. How is he to know what is a war crime and what was a perfectly legitimate tactic? Answer; the other side would tell him, once they'd won the war. How could that be fair or legal?

"They're here," Mac said, in relief. They'd arrived in the nick of time. "The Warriors are going to be fucking broken!"

We'd prepared as many vehicles as we could and sent them to Stonewall, accompanied by our best drivers and gunners. (We hadn't thought of primitive tanks, though; that had been a Warrior innovation.) They'd waited there, behind the walls in the sealed vehicle park that also held some armoured trucks that had been used to transport prisoners, in happier times. They'd been armoured to levels that made some of the military vehicles I'd seen look unprotected, just to ensure that the prisoner's friends couldn't liberate him on his way to the courtroom for the umpteenth appeal. It had been known to happen. Richard had been given command of the detachment with instructions to bring the vehicles right into the flank of the Warrior lines, supported by assaults from high above. We were throwing everything we had into one final battle.

The noise was terrifyingly loud as the vehicles opened fire, raking great streams of tracer into the massed ranks of the Warriors. They'd lost their caution, such as it was, when they'd pushed their way into the final defence lines and their men had been lined up like cattle,

hundreds of them. They were easy targets for the machine guns mounted on the vehicles and most of them didn't even hit the ground or try to defend themselves.

I keyed my radio. "Rose," I said, "bring up the women."

The noise grew louder as the women emerged from their reveries to join the defenders, who were pushing the Warriors back as they realised that they'd been outflanked. I couldn't believe that they hadn't even bothered to watch for threats from outside Ingalls, but perhaps they had and the message had simply gotten lost in the confusion. Someone historian would probably draw up a complete plan of the battle and swear blind that I had had a definite battle plan, rather than something I'd just pulled together in a hurry. The Warriors would probably find themselves the heroes, then the villains, and then the heroes again. That's how historical revisionism works.

"They're breaking," Mac shouted, in delight. We could see it now; the massed ranks of the Warriors, once so united for a purpose, were breaking apart. The dead and dying littered the battlefield everywhere as their lines collapsed into bloody chaos. Here and there, holdouts were still fighting desperately, but they knew that it was a losing game, even if it were the only one left to them. They probably expected that we would kill them on the spot. Others were running for their lives, doubtless fearing that we would put a shot through their backs if they didn't run fast enough, although I wondered where they would go. I doubted that the Prophet would be so happy to see them after they had lost the war.

I found myself humming Jonnie Cope under my breath and forced myself to stop.

"Good," I said. The disintegration process was growing rapidly as other warriors attempted to surrender, throwing down their guns and putting their hands in the air. Several of them were shot down by their preachers for daring to surrender, but a single burst of machine gun fire sent most of them to their lord. I was sure that he had prepared a warm welcome for them, after everything they'd done in his name. I keyed my radio and called Richard. "Richard, hit them with the surrender demand, now."

"Yes, sir," Richard replied. His voice boomed out over the battlefield. "SURRENDER NOW. THROW DOWN YOUR GUNS, KEEP YOUR HANDS IN THE AIR AND YOU WILL BE SPARED!" The noise had to be heard to be believed. Some of the Warriors had probably been struck deaf by the racket, if they hadn't been deaf already firing their weapons. "SURRENDER AND YOU WILL LIVE!"

The fighting was starting to die down as the pockets of resistance were quickly eliminated. Hundreds of warriors – former Warriors, I guessed – wanted to surrender, allowing us to wipe out the pockets of hardcore fighters quickly and brutally. Some of their preachers, I wasn't surprised to see, had broken along with their men, pleading for mercy and fearing that it would never come. Others had tried to flee and had been shot in the back. I liked to think, later, that some of their own soldiers had killed them as they fled. The hardcore fighters had probably accounted for most of them.

(The Warriors who were attacking the other two positions melted away when they realised that we had broken the main attack. They were a persistent pain in the ass – bandits and insurgents – for the next few years. On the other hand, plenty of people earned their spurs fighting them.)

“We won,” Mac said, astonished. The dead and dying littered the battlefield; hundreds of bodies, thousands of lives lost or ruined. “I thought that we were about to die bravely on the battlefield.”

“Me too,” I admitted. We shared a laugh for a long moment. It felt damn good to laugh after all the horrors we’d seen. We had broken the Warriors of the Lord and they wouldn’t have time to regroup before we completed the task of destroying them. “I suppose we’d better deal with the prisoners.”

I was tempted just to herd them all together and turn the machine guns on them – the reports from everywhere they’d occupied had been roundly unpleasant – but human decency prevailed. The prisoners looked utterly terrified now that their faith had been broken, a handful muttering away to themselves, others just staring at us as if they couldn’t believe how stupid they’d been. Part of me felt a little sorry for them, part of me remembered their victims and resolved that it would be a long time before I trusted them enough to let them go back to being free men.

Richard passed me the megaphone and I put it to work. “Attention,” I said, loudly enough to be heard right down the valley towards Summersville. We were going to have to go there next, once we’d secured the prisoners and seen to our wounded, just to liberate them and keep pushing the Warriors until they broke completely. “Listen very carefully. It will keep you alive. You were captured in battle and we have a perfect right to shoot you out of hand if you cause trouble. Obey our orders, answer our questions, and you might just live to rebuild your lives. Disobey and we’ll kill you and move on to the next prisoner.”

I wasn't bluffing, either. One by one, the prisoners were frisked under guard, their pockets emptied of everything from spare ammunition to tiny bibles, including one apparently written by the Prophet Zechariah himself, their hands secured and sent to sit in a field. Yes, it was rather cruel, but I wasn't in the mood to take chances with men who had proven themselves to be dangerous, very dangerous, to their victims. Some of them, broken of the brainwashing and conditioning, might make useful citizens later on, but they had to prove themselves first. We weren't going to take chances. A pair of men stood up to protest their treatment – they must have been lawyers before the war, I decided; only lawyers would have been so dumb – and were promptly shot down. The remainder, after feeling the blood splashing over their bodies, decided to shut up. It was wise of them.

“Separate the preachers from the rest of them and move them up to Stonewall,” I ordered. “Put them through a rigorous interrogation program and compare their answers; feel free to hurt them as much as you need to get them to talk.” Richard nodded. “Send anything important, such as the number of remaining Warriors of the Lord, down to us through the radio. Biggles will relay it if necessary, but we can't stay here, not now that they're on the run.”

“I understand,” Richard said. I had wondered if he would feel resentment at me for taking over his flying column – the 7th Cavalry, as I had mentally dubbed it, although the original 7th Cavalry had been wiped out at Little Big Horn – but he was eager to get the prisoners under control. We'd taken over three hundred prisoners and killed perhaps ten times that number; minor, on the scale of World War Two, but hellishly significant compared to the number of people left alive after the Final War. “Good luck, sir.”

I mounted one of the armoured cars – Mac had quietly, but firmly prevented me from climbing into the lead vehicle – and we set off down the road back down towards the FOB...and Summersville. We were all on tenterhooks, tired, but very aware of the possibility that we might win the war in the next few hours, and that gave us strength and determination to continue. We passed a handful of Warriors on the run as we drove down, mainly preachers who had abandoned their men, and asked for their surrender. A pair of preachers tried to fight and were promptly gunned down; the remainder surrendered, were cuffed, and left by the side of the road. We'd pick them up later.

"Take a swing around the FOB," Mac suggested, and I nodded. The FOB might have been in enemy hands, but there might well be some mines and other unexploded surprises in the surrounding area. The engineers who had prepared the defences had been left behind at Ingalls, deemed too important to risk. They'd been furious about it, but I hadn't budged at all. They were going to be a damn sight more important than me in the coming days. "Dutch, want to take a look up there?"

Dutch nodded and the pair of them led a company of men back to the FOB. I had to wait for the all-clear before the remainder of the force went up to the position we'd held with stubborn determination, but all we found was a handful of prisoners and several dead preachers. They hadn't been killed fighting, either; they'd been killed after surrender, once we found the girls. The oldest of them couldn't have been more than fourteen. What happened to them I wouldn't have wished upon my ex-girlfriend.

"Bastards," I said, once I'd seen the bodies. They still haunt me today, those terribly small and broken bodies. "Next time, make them dig their own graves first."

We paused to take pictures of the sight – I wasn't going to have some bastard of a revisionist historian claiming that the Warriors had been the good guys, like they did for pretty much every other evil set of bastards in history, not if I could help it – and returned to our vehicles, speeding down the road towards Summersville. We dismounted close to the defences we'd helped them build, back before we had even a vague idea that the Warriors existed, and advanced carefully. Mac, again, wouldn't let me take the lead.

I had feared that we were advancing into a ghost town, like some of the burned-out ruins we had scavenged in, back before we'd discovered the Warriors, but there were a small number of defenders left in the town. It gave me that sense of *Déjà vu* all over again; back when we had confronted CORA, we had had to rescue prisoners who had been held in a group of warehouses. We'd passed the mass graves on the way, but I hoped that some of the town's population would have survived. The Warriors wouldn't have killed them all, would they?

We stopped when a fifteen-year-old girl appeared, holding what passed for a white flag on the end of a stick in her hand. It was actually a piece of ladies underwear, but we understood the message clearly. I allowed Roshanda to talk to her, girl to girl; beside, Roshanda should have understood what the poor girl had been through.

"Hi, honey," Roshanda said, gently. "What do they want you to say for them?"

The girl could barely speak. I traced out bruises and marks on what I could see of her flesh and felt my anger growing inside my heart. My men had similar feelings. The mutterings

behind me were growing darker and darker by the minute. They'd beaten her, treated her as a slave and probably raped her as well. They would be lucky if we just killed them once we had our hands on them. No one deserved that sort of treatment, no one. Not for the first time, I cursed the politicians who had gotten us into the war.

"They said to tell you that they could kill everyone here like they killed daddy," the girl said. It was a little girl's voice, hardly the mature confident voice of an assertive American teenage girl. She might not have spent long under their control, but it had been long enough to break her, body and soul. "They said that they wanted safe conduct and if you agreed not to kill them, they would let us all go."

They must have had a radio link to their army, I thought, angrily. I hated hostage situations. I don't know a single law enforcement officer who doesn't hate them. This one was worse; we had to have those women and children back, just to give birth to more children. We needed them desperately.

"Very well," I said, reluctantly. "Go back and tell them that if they come out now, without weapons, I won't kill them."

She nodded and turned to trot back towards their defences. I followed her with my eyes, spying out the enemy locations. I wished that I had had time to question her properly, but she had been too fragile for any such harsh questioning. It would also have risked her life. I doubted that the Warriors would have spared her if they had suspected we'd had time to question her. She vanished inside and there was a long pause.

"Damn it, Boss," Mac said, very quietly. "You're not going to let them get away with this, are you?"

"Hell, no," I said. I already had a plan, such as it was. Maybe it was just my growing sense of the battlefield, but I was increasingly sure that we had broken the main body of the Warrior army. "Once we deal with this lot, we keep moving southwards and deal with the rest of them."

The lead Warrior stepped out, hands held in plain sight, followed by a handful of others, all preachers. There were no real fighters amongst them, much to my relief, just a handful who turned out to have been left to mind the broken town while the army moved on to new conquests. They looked terrified as they saw our faces, but as they remembered the bargain, they started to look more confident. What could we do to them, they wondered, that wouldn't break the agreement?

I stepped into their quarters and was nearly sick. I had known that it would be bad, but the conditions were appalling. The women and children, over three hundred of them, had been kept in a warehouse, in conditions that I wouldn't have wished upon anyone, even my worst enemy. I won't describe it, but leave it to your imagination. I'd bet ten dollars that you won't imagine anything worse than what we saw. There were hostages in Iraq who were kept in better conditions than this. We took a moment to check that they hadn't left any nasty surprises behind, and then called up the nurses to help tend to them. It would be touch and go for some of them. They might not survive the year.

We stepped back outside. The Warriors still looked cocky, if slightly nervous, but I was in no mood for games. "Take aim," I ordered. The men lifted their weapons and took aim at them. They stared at us for a moment, and then they started to shout, everything from pleading to frantic denials. "Fire."

Yes, I broke my word. I admit it.

But they deserved it.

Just ask their victims.

Chapter Forty-Two

Only the dead have seen the end of war.

-Plato

The next fortnight passed very quickly.

We advanced, quickly and brutally, against the Warriors wherever we found them. Using the interrogation results from the various prisoners, all of whom proved surprisingly willing to talk even without being tortured, we located and invested a dozen towns that had been overrun and occupied by the Warriors, even as we moved southeast towards their stronghold. The story was always the same, although the level of devotion kept changing. One town had successfully rebelled against the occupation and killed all of the Warriors in the town, another had tried to rebel, failed, and had been burned to the ground. We saw more bodies in the fortnight than we had seen ever since we had started to creep out of Ingalls to explore the surrounding area.

I was determined not to give them a chance to recover after the destruction of their main army – indeed, their only army. They'd made their best attempt at crushing us early on and had lost most of their army trying, with the remainder surrendering or fleeing into the surrounding area to become bandits. I was fairly sure that we would wipe them out fairly quickly, as long as they didn't have a chance to recover. It was unlikely that they would get that chance. Unlike some insurgent groups, they were hated beyond words by most of the people who had to live with them, who were just waiting for a chance to stick a knife in their backs. The further south we pushed towards New Jerusalem – as they had come to call their fortress - the more the chaos spread, with Warriors being defeated and crushed by their slaves. My army swelled ever larger as we assimilated the remaining rebels and brought them into the fold. They wanted revenge as much as we wanted it, with a little extra determination to avenge their lost families...and their lives. They would never have had a chance to survive and prosper under the Warriors and they knew it.

We saw strange and horrific sights as we proceeded into what had once been called Kentucky. The Warriors hadn't hesitated to push their social system as far forward as they could and the results had been devastating. There were entire communities set up to push forward the Warriors message on innocent male kids, stolen from their relatives at an early age and brought up among fanatical believers. The kids who would become the Taliban, I recalled reading, had been treated the same way. They'd been kept apart from girls, taught that females were always subordinated to the men, and naturally they'd believed it. The results had been horrific and, if we hadn't nipped it in the bud, would have come to America. The perverted religion would have been different, but the result would have been the same.

Give me the child at five and I will shape his life...

Others hadn't been so lucky. We encountered mass graves, dug by slave labour and used for rebels, dissidents and Muslims, along with a handful of others who had refused to renounce their prior religion. The Warriors God was a jealous God, it seemed, and the Warriors had devastated any area that refused to bend the knee to them. The women had been worst off of all. The lucky ones had become wives of the Warriors and treated reasonably well – but always subordinate to the men, always homemakers, nothing more – while the unlucky ones had become whores, or worse. They'd copied us, insofar as pregnant women got the best

food, but past that...the treatment of women had been terrifying. In primitive societies, women always get the short end of the stick, sometimes literally. The feminists who talk about how Adam and Eve had been equals in the Garden of Eden have no perspective at all. Their lives, in the dark ages, would have been nasty, brutish and short.

It was easy enough to locate New Jerusalem; the freed slaves and labourers were more than happy to point us in the right direction. I wasn't about to launch an unplanned assault, however, not when they'd had years to prepare for any attack. They might have expected the Federal Government to launch an assault – according to some elements of the religious right, Christianity is the most persecuted religion in pre-war America, which is ludicrous when you think about it – or someone like us to come along in the early days after the war, but New Jerusalem was armed to the teeth. They had believed, as an article of faith, that the apocalypse would come...and it had come, in the form of a nuclear war. They'd had the advance knowledge the rest of us wish we'd had. Score one for religious fundamentalists...

And yet, if they had been kind and decent, as Jesus had taught, they could have reshaped the country gently, in their image. They could have organised relief, fed the refugees and pushed them into helping themselves. They had had enough guns and food to ensure that their agenda would dominate the new America, but instead they'd built a theocracy that was collapsing as we pushed east, its belief in its own supremacy utterly crushed. The news of the defeat had moved south-eastwards at the speed of light, quite literally, and the Warriors had been broken. I half-hoped that they would surrender quickly and put an end to the war.

"I might have made a mistake," I admitted to Mac, as we studied the defences from what we fervently hoped was a safe distance. The walls of New Jerusalem were strong, against both friend and foe, and any assault would be incredibly costly. "If we had treated the surrendering Warriors as we had promised, it might be easier to convince this merry lot to surrender."

"I don't think that they would have lasted long in any case," Mac said. "Did you see the look on some of their victims' faces?"

I nodded. Some of them had been in shock, too emotionally withdrawn to notice that something important had changed, but others had been determined to extract revenge. They'd been blatantly preparing to tear the captives in two towns apart, despite my request that they be held for labour duties later, and it was hard to blame them. The women were particularly inventive. As the Afghans say, never let them give you to the women. They'd been raped, beaten, and turned into slaves. Was it any wonder that they wanted to get their own back? I just hoped that they could live with themselves afterwards.

"It's hopeless for them," I decided, after we had surveyed New Jerusalem. It might have been intended as a mighty city, but apart from the original buildings at the centre, it was a smelly dump. The slaves we had liberated had explained that the Prophet had been intent upon building a new town, a shining city on a hill, and worked hundreds of refugees to death trying to do just that. I doubted, looking at it through my binoculars, that New Jerusalem would survive for long without constant maintenance. It looked as if it would be lucky to survive the winter. "I wonder if we should bother to demand a surrender, or if we should wait for them to starve."

“If we wait, they’ll kill and eat all the slaves,” Mac predicted, glumly. “At the very least, they’ll starve the poor bastards to death just to keep their Warriors fit and healthy for a few days longer.”

“True,” I agreed. I didn’t want to take the place by storm, but I had an uneasy feeling that I was being pushed into that decision by circumstances. The military issue of tackling a siege is simple; the enemy soldiers, who are the ones with the guns, will eat first. They’re in charge by means of brute force. The unarmed civilians would eat last, if there were anything left for them, and if there was nothing...well, tough. And, in the last war, world opinion would have blamed us for their suffering. Now, that hardly mattered. The generation that rebuilt a new America would take a harder line towards such slanders from the media. “I wonder if...”

The explosion took us all by surprise, a massive thunder-crash that blasted through one of the gates facing us, shattering the defences with surprising ease. I gaped for a long moment, then realised, in a moment of awe, that the slaves had rebelled against their masters, buying us a chance to take New Jerusalem with their lives. I looked up at Mac and saw that we shared the same thought. *Attack.*

“Dutch, Brent, move,” I ordered. The two of them commanded the point companies, the heavily armed assault force. I had come to think of them as my hard entry specialists, although we had barely had the chance to train them to anything like pre-war standards. These days, we would have to think in terms of applying extra firepower, rather than subtle assaults. “Get your men up there, now! Mac, take the vehicles and get them some support!”

The two companies advanced on the double, taking terrible risks to try to seize the way into the town. It was a close-run thing; the slaves didn’t have many weapons and they had no body armour. I don’t know why, but despite their work, they were almost completely naked. I guess it was intended to rub their new status into their minds. They’d been on the verge of breaking, having triggered an IED to give us the change to get in, when the lead company rushed into the area and pushed the Warriors back out. They might not have gone through a Boot Camp, or Hell Week, but they took the gates like old pros and cleared the Warriors out of that entire section. Hundreds of slaves, thin and emancipated after months of mistreatment, came forward to greet us, but we had to push them to the rear. We had to push our advantage before the remainder of the Warriors rallied and tried to push us back out of the town.

New Jerusalem had been built, mainly, of wood – and again, I don’t know why. Fire spread from house to house as the inner circle of the Warriors – their preachers and the bureaucrats (and now I *knew* they were the bad guys) and some others, whose roles remained uncertain – fought desperately against us, and their slaves. It was a nightmarish fight, multi-sided as such battles tend to be, with nurses turning on their charges, maids stabbing their employers in the back and worse. A band of slaves who were being sold on the auction block – I kid you not – turned on their masters and ripped them apart, before rampaging through the houses and destroying everything they found that reminded them of their servitude. We even found ourselves in the odd position of protecting some surrendered Warriors – mainly women and children – from their former slaves, who wanted to wipe them all out, root and branch. I wasn’t unsympathetic to their demands, but I wasn’t going to kill kids, not if it could be avoided. They could be brought up better in the future. The men were largely killed on sight before they had a chance to escape the inferno and reach our forces.

“They’re falling back on the main fortress,” Dutch reported, as his force advanced down towards the main building complex. Unlike the rest of New Jerusalem, it was built out of heavy stone, intended to stand off a major assault. We launched a flanking assault from two directions at once and were thrown back by a volley of coordinated fire. “Sir...?”

I stared at the building, *hating* it. If I’d had a B52 with a JDAM onboard, I would have called it in and then picked up the remains of the Prophet with tweezers. The single aircraft I did have didn’t have the firepower to do more than make the inhabitants rather unhappy. As long as they could fire freely, taking it was going to be costly...and we’d already lost more men than I cared to think about, to say nothing of the former slaves.

“Get the mortar teams up here,” I ordered, once we’d cleared the remainder of the city. The prisoners, such as they were, were escorted out of the ruins of their homes and taken outside the city. They would have to be dealt with later. “We’ll blow the rats out of their nest.”

The teams arrived once we’d finished sealing off the area and took up positions behind enough cover – I hoped – that snipers in the fortress couldn’t pick them off before they could open fire. I had managed to round up a few slaves who had seen part of the innards, but none had seen more than a tiny section of the complex, while the girls they’d taken right inside had never emerged again. I didn’t want to think about what they probably meant, although I knew that it meant that they had probably killed the girls, or kept them trapped inside.

“We’re ready, sir,” Gary reported, finally. He’d been a professional before retiring to Ingalls and knew how to make a mortar sit up and dance. “Permission to open fire?”

“Blow them to hell,” I ordered, tightly. The first mortar opened fire, followed rapidly by the remaining weapons, smashing shells down on the building. If we were lucky, one of them would slip through the firing holes and explode within the building, but the bombardment alone would be an unpleasant experience for them. The noise alone would force them to consider surrender. I watched as one of the shells exploded right on top of a firing port, close enough to send fragments of hot metal inside the building – I couldn’t hear any screams, but we might well have hit their defenders – and then another shell landed right inside. The results were spectacular. Tongues of fire emerged from every firing port in the building and the entire side of the bunker slowly disintegrated.

“Hold fire,” I ordered. “Dutch, it’s all yours.”

I wanted to be with them as Dutch led his company across the rubble and right into the building, charging into a rat’s nest of enemy fighters...if any of them had survived the blast. One of our shells must have detonated an ammunition supply, I decided, as they probed deeper into the complex. The noise of firing rocketed upwards, quickly, and then faded down again. The Warriors of the Lord had to have come to the end of their endurance, unless there was a long escape tunnel somewhere in the building. I doubted that that would have been their first choice. If the Prophet and his men came up outside the building, they were likely to be torn apart by their former slaves.

And I wanted the bastard. I wanted to take his neck in my hands and squeeze really hard.

“They’re trying to surrender,” Dutch called back. “Do we accept?”

“Take them prisoner,” I ordered, coldly. We would sort out who we had in our hands – and who was responsible for what – before we did anything else, and then we would mete out justice. If I’d thought about keeping them alive, perhaps as slave labour, those thoughts had faded after seeing the results of their short rule over their section of America. “Have you captured the Prophet?”

“Yes,” Dutch said, after a moment. “I’m sending him out now.”

I wasn't sure what I had expected. Perhaps an impressive figure, with a beard that rivalled Santa Claus, or a diabolical John Simms-like figure, but the man in front of me was pathetic. He was short, squat and growing what looked rather like a beer belly. Judging from the way he was blinking incessantly, he'd been down in a bunker for too long, or maybe he'd lost a pair of glasses somewhere back during the battle. The Prophet was, I decided, a huge disappointment. This man – this ugly insignificant man – had brought us to the brink of defeat? It didn't seem creditable, somehow...

But I remembered what Reverend Thomas had said, weeks ago. A man with a brain and a gift for public speaking could go far when the world had been turned upside down. Hitler hadn't been a very impressive figure either, but he'd managed to set the world on fire, turning Germany from a beaten state into a world-challenging power, and then taking it a step too far and seeing it all burning down around him. Hitler had never expressed any remorse either. He'd thought in terms of tactical mistakes, not the ultimate mistake of starting the war in the first place.

Or perhaps the Prophet, whatever his real name had been, had been bullied at school.

“Mercy,” he said, softly. It was so soft that I could barely hear him. “Mercy and I’ll give you whatever you want...”

“No,” a voice shouted. “No!”

I spun around. A girl, naked apart from a pair of sheer panties and a harem shirt that left nothing to the imagination, was running towards him. She held a piece of cut glass in her hand, held out towards him. I could have stopped her at any moment, or any of us could have stopped her, but we did nothing. She plunged the makeshift knife into his throat and collapsed as the blood started to spill out. The Prophet died on his knees.

“I couldn't take any more,” the girl said, between sobs. “I just couldn't take any more.”

“It's all right,” I said, as comfortably as I could. How could I blame her for killing her tormentor? It was justice, after all, of the same kind as the Prophet had meted out to others. He deserved every moment of suffering. “You can make a new life for yourself now.”

Before we left, we burned the remainder of New Jerusalem to the ground.

It seemed the right thing to do, somehow.

Chapter Forty-Three

Adrian Veidt: I did the right thing, didn't I? It all worked out in the end.

Dr. Manhattan: 'In the end'? Nothing ends, Adrian. Nothing ever ends.

-Watchmen

Robert McClellan Stalker was born, by an odd coincidence, on the day the new Constitution was finally ratified into existence. It had taken months of arguing, debating – publicly and privately – and threats of secession before we all ended up with a compromise that we all could believe in. Ben-David's new constitution, slightly modified by the events of the past few months, had been approved by the vast majority of the population and turned into law. The New United States had been born.

I had been oddly reluctant to fly the Stars and Stripes before we voted the new Constitution into power, despite protests from both sides of the political spectrum. That had changed when we created the new/old nation and brought the new America to life, even though we had already determined that it was merely a continuation of what had existed prior to the Final War. The battles with the Warriors of the Lord, the desperate struggle to raise enough food to see us through the winter, the careful monitoring of every pregnancy to catch complications before they arose...all had finally led towards the new government. In some ways, it was a better society than what had gone before...

But had it been worth the cost? I knew roughly how many people had died in West Virginia and the surrounding states and I hated to think about how many more had died outside the areas we'd contacted, or outside the United States. Places like France and Germany would have been caught in the centre of the atomic whirlwind and utterly devastated, far worse than the United States, and I didn't want to think about how badly we'd hammered the Russians, or how badly they might have hammered the Chinese and Turks, their other hereditary enemies. The new society had come at the price of well over a billion deaths and our ultimate survival was far from certain. Had it really been worth the cost?

I shook my head, dismissing the thought. It hadn't been a price I had decided to pay, although I had been forced to pay it along with most of the remaining survivors, who might as well have been lottery winners for all the luck they'd had in surviving, but one I had had to pay. I hadn't heard anything from the remaining members of my family, or Uncle Billy, or anyone else who might have been related to me. The handful of stories we'd heard from New York had been horrific, with nuclear devastation bringing down the city and trapping thousands of people in the death zone surrounding the metropolis. Mac had lost cousins somewhere in the war zone in Europe, and a second cousin somewhere in Afghanistan. That was something else I didn't want to think about, I had decided long ago. Ingalls had been bad enough, but Afghanistan would have been a nightmare for those westerners unlucky enough to be caught up in the general area. It would be years before the United States became a superpower again – God alone knew what was happening outside our borders – but I no longer doubted that we would do it. It might take years, or centuries, but we would be back.

Rose looked up at me tiredly from where she was holding my – our – son. He looked so small and frail in her arms, but I felt a protective rush of tenderness every time I looked at him. I hadn't liked children very much when I'd been an unmarried man, but now...I just looked at Robert and knew that he would be part of my life. I'd bring him up – with Rose, of course – and teach him how to survive in this world. He wouldn't have the memory of what

the world had been like before the war to hold him back, or to distract us with grief in an unguarded moment; the brave new world would be his. I'd make it his even if I had to kill every last surviving Warrior or bandit out there in the wastelands surrounding the New United States.

"Ed," she said, tiredly. "What are you thinking?"

"I was thinking that he's my son," I said, honestly. I hadn't shown her – at least, I thought I hadn't shown her – but I'd been terrified that she would have miscarried, or given birth to a mutant. We had only one surviving mutant child and she – a little girl born with only one eye in the centre of her forehead – might not survive the next few years. I honestly wasn't sure if we were doing her any favours allowing her to survive at all, but her mother wanted to keep her and Kit refused to even consider a mercy killing. There had been a time, years ago before the war, when even thinking such thoughts would have been...well, unthinkable, but now...now they came too frequently. It bothered me from time to time. What sort of monsters were we becoming in this brave new world. "I was thinking that perhaps he'd like a little sister."

"Get away with you," Rose said, waving a weak arm in my direction. "I'm not having another kid until I've recovered from this one."

"We could adopt," I suggested. Thanks to the Warriors – and their mad social policies – there were thousands of kids running around without parents, often without even the slightest idea of where they'd come from in the first place. Most of them had been adopted pretty quickly, but there were still huge imbalances...and yes, some exploitation of the kids by farmers and others. I'd had to hang a farmer for abusing his adopted daughter two months ago and the whole episode still left a dirty taste in my mouth. "There are plenty of kids around..."

"Not yet," Rose said, tiredly. She leaned back on the bed and closed her eyes. "I'm tired. If I'd known my mother had put so much work into bringing me into the world, I would have been..."

Her voice slurred and she fell asleep. Kit appeared, as if from nowhere, and carefully picked up little Robert from her arms, transferring him into his own as if he weighed almost nothing. Perhaps he did, to him. I'd held my son earlier and the baby had felt almost weightless.

"You should leave us to take care of her," Kit said, as one of the nurses appeared. We had hundreds more nurses now – Rose's own social policies had been paying off, although it was surprising how many had become pregnant in the last few months – and there wasn't one of them who wouldn't look after Rose's child as if it were her own. The discovery of the male-dominated Warrior society and their treatment of their women had concentrated quite a few minds; indeed, many of the small businesses in the area were owned and operated by women. "I'll call you back as soon as something changes."

I couldn't help myself. I had to ask. "Doctor," I said, "is she going to be alright?"

Kit's 'you're a stupid idiot' look would have done credit to a Drill Sergeant. "Women have been giving birth since the human race evolved from monkeys," he said, his voice perfectly dry. "Rose is a strong and healthy mother, the strongest we've had for quite some time, who

took good care of herself. She will be tired and cranky for the next few days – and you’d damn well better be tolerant of that – but she’ll be fine. I wouldn’t advise sex for a week or so anyway...”

“Thank you,” I said, before he could break into an increasingly sardonic attack on our personal lives. For a noted homosexual, Kit could be surprisingly blunt at times, although I knew that he’d donated some of his own sperm to the community. “I’ll call back in a few hours.”

“Out,” Kit said, firmly.

I stepped out of the hospital and smiled to myself as I took in the sights of Ingalls. Hundreds of men and women thronged around, many of them wearing newer clothes woven in town, or scavenged from the surrounding area. It astonished me how many vital items had just been abandoned in the area, items that most people didn’t consider to be useful, but were items we desperately needed. In the next few years, we’d either have to start making such items for ourselves or go without, but for the moment we had an embarrassment of riches. It showed, too, in the renovation of Ingalls. The damage caused by the Warrior attack had been repaired and a new monument, a tribute to those who had falling in the Warrior War, had been erected in the centre of town.

My feet had taken me, unbidden, to the military headquarters, a building that had once belonged to a wealthy corporate agent as a tax dodge – or so I suspected – before the war, after which it had been taken over by the military I’d worked to build. The guard at the main entrance checked my ID before allowing me to enter – with so many newcomers in the community, we had to be more careful about ID cards, even though we lacked the ability to make foolproof systems – and waved me inside, allowing me to walk up to my office. I was only saluted by a handful of people as I passed through the main office. I might have been their General, the uniformed head of the New American Army, but I disliked being saluted when it wasn’t strictly necessary. It wasn’t my only innovation. The officers in the headquarters were all there for a few months, in-between postings to actual combat units, just long enough to be useful without infecting them with the political disease. The old Pentagon had been full of soldiers who hadn’t been worthy of the title. My new headquarters would have officers who had actually been there and done that. It wasn’t as if I didn’t have plenty of combat vets to choose from when it came to manning the handful of desks.

The map in front of me, updated daily, showed little to be concerned about at the moment. The bandits had been largely wiped out by us, or the Warriors, or had come in from the cold. There were still isolated groups of Warriors out there, too hardcore to just surrender, who still posed a threat to convoys, but we’d wipe them all out eventually. They could hide from us, but we were expanding our patrols constantly, often led by their former slaves. They were *very* motivated to hunt down the remainder of the Warriors, not least because it would give them that vital ingredient for citizenship, military service. There were reports and hints of further populations to the south, east and north, but we’d meet up with them in time. The teams I had sent to the bigger cities, keeping well aware from the hot zones, had reported that most of them were completely empty, or inhabited only by Last Men. A handful of them had come to join us, but others...others had refused even to recognise our existence. They had been right on the verge of madness.

There was a knock at the door. “Come in,” I shouted. One thing I had turned down was a secretary, although that might have been a mistake; I had too much for one person to handle, without assistance. Mac stepped into the room and winked at me. He was dressed in what had become our standard uniform – a pair of homemade trousers and a shirt – and looked surprisingly happy. His wedding had been the largest such affair in Ingalls since the Final War.

I smiled. “Mac,” I said, “ready to return to duty?”

“Maybe just a little,” Mac agreed, with a wink. He wore the insignia of a Colonel on his shirt, although we hadn’t bothered with dress uniforms, not least because it would have made him a target. I intended to try to avoid the fruit salad displays of some senior officers who had never seen a battlefield in their lives. “You didn’t tell me that being married was so much fun.”

“It was a cunning plan to keep you from getting cold feet,” I said, baiting him gently. He did look better than he had the last time I saw him. “Married life seems to suit you.”

“Well, apart from the nagging, the whining, and the baby on the way...” Mac began. I rolled my eyes at him. “Nah, it’s a great time that I’m having.”

“Splendid,” I said. “I don’t know about you, but I’m getting bored in this office. Perhaps we should start planning an exhibition down to the south, or maybe northwards towards New York.”

Mac frowned. “I don’t think that we might find anything useful,” he said, doubtfully. We’d explored the remains of the USMC base at Quantico a few months after we’d crushed the Warriors, and could afford to spare a hundred heavily armed men from the farming efforts, and we’d found nothing, but ruins. The Russians had had a real mad-on for the base and pounded it several times, destroying most of the complex. There had been a few survivors, helping to assist in a handful of barely-functional towns, but little had been left of the infrastructure. “Remember Washington?”

I nodded, doubtfully. One of Biggles’s flights had taken him near Washington, now little more than ruins, a dead city on unstable ground. The Russians had hit the city with at least five warheads, according to our best estimate, and the results had been devastating. If there was anyone still alive down there, near the black craters that marked the site of a set of ground-busts next to where the White House had been, they hadn’t been in evidence. We hadn’t sent a ground party into the city. It would only have upset us.

“That’s not the point,” I said, seriously. “I want a full record of everything that happened since the war.”

Mac nodded, but then, he understood my reasoning. If we could construct a photographic record of everything that had happened, it might become harder for future ‘academics’ to deconstruct everything we had done, or cast a dark slant over it. I had founded the museum myself, using photographs of the atrocities committed by the Warriors as the basis of the history section, although some parents had complained about it not being family-friendly. I had always thought that that was a little odd. They might not think that it was ‘right’ for kids to see such sights, but it was ‘kids’ that it had happened to, back before we had broken the

Warriors. Privately, I gave it ten years before the revisionists got to work and started claiming that the Warriors had been the real victims. I guess that distance doesn't always lend perspective, after all.

"You do get to rest from time to time," Mac said. "I thought that you were going to be running for President next year."

I laughed. "President," I said, shaking my head. "I'd sooner be dead."

And that, more or less, is the end of my story. Ingalls and the New United States had been firmly established and we would survive, although not easily. There would be other challenges in the future, with new threats and new enemies waiting for us just over the horizon, but the seeds of the reconstruction had been firmly sowed. I could write about those, but that's not my story to tell...and besides, I want you to buy other books from the aftermath of the Final War.

I won't attempt to justify myself any further. I have explained my reasoning for everything I did, as best as I could. There are general histories of the New United States or the Reconstruction Period that provide a less personal overview, if that is what you are seeking. I did the best I could...and I – we – kept civilisation alive. The world you live in, today, is the one I built. If you can stand up and question what we did, well...I know I did a good job.

(They told us that we won the Final War. If what we lived through was victory, I don't ever want to know defeat.)

I'd like to close this memoir with a quote from one of my old commanding officers, who was asked, back in 2003 when the world was a kinder, gentler place, what we Marines should do if we were confronted with an anti-war protester. I may have the exact words wrong, but I think the sentiment shines though.

"You should shake his hand, and thank him for exercising the rights you fought to defend, and wink at his daughter."

Edward Stalker.

Staff Sergeant, USMC (Ret.)
General, NUSA Army (Ret.)

Epilogue

From: *Edward Stalker: A Political Reassessment*. (Dominic Beethoven, Professor of Post-Modern Peace Studies, University of New Clarksburg, 2100.)

In a more civilised word, there is little question that Edward Stalker would be considered a criminal; a mass murderer, a tyrant and a monster who ran roughshod over every principle of common decency known to man. He may have started life as a US Marine, with a honourable career behind him when he was wounded and retired from the Corps, but his future life was doomed to be controversial. Given an opportunity to shape the future of a world that had been brutally reshaped by the Final War, Stalker didn't hesitate. Indeed, although he downplays this aspect in his memoirs, the survival of the population of Ingalls, the unification of the Principle Towns into the New United States and the defeat of the Warriors of the Lord are largely down to him.

Stalker described himself as little more than a talented amateur at the art of war, but his achievements are unquestioned. So, alas, are his failures and what we may consider atrocities. There is no doubt, as he himself makes clear, that he decided to cold-bloodily murder over two thousand inhabitants of the Stonewall Maximum Security Prison. There is also no doubt that he effectively enslaved the remaining prisoners and used them to construct defences, dig mass graves and much else, in stark defiance of the Revised Constitution. (See *Ben-David Singleton and the Making of the New United States*, Chapter Nine, for further details.) He even added to the work gangs with other prisoners, starting with ordinary criminals from Ingalls and the surrounding area, and continuing with surviving Warriors and bandits. While it must be acknowledged that the reformation rate of ex-prisoners has been much higher than pre-war statistics, one may find it inhumane that prisoners were expected to work under conditions of considerable danger.

That was, but the least of his actions. He had refugees blocked from entering Ingalls and used deadly force, where necessary, to prevent them from entering the town. He used torture to make a prisoner – later, additional prisoners – talk and tell him what he needed to know. He deployed poison gas against the Warriors of the Lord and, finally, executed many of the higher-ranking Warriors personally. What can one make of such a man?

Finally, Edward Stalker instituted a form of democracy that was, by intent and design, considerably limited. The results of this linger on today. It is not clear who was truly to blame. The person who suggested the core idea – a vote in exchange for military service, later broadened out to a handful of other occupations – remains unknown. (The original idea came from Robert A. Heinlein, who was clearly not present at Ingalls on the grounds he was dead at the time - an excellent alibi.) Edward Stalker has been blamed for that by his detractors and has never, significantly, denied it. There can be little doubt, however, that Stalker was one of the main voices pushing for the implementation of such a scheme and with so many veterans of the Warrior War in the area, it was pushed through with ease.

And yet, did Stalker have any other choice? We look back from our safe world and try to imagine what it was like back in those days. We have it easier than many others do – we have the records taken and saved by Stalker himself, among others – but we cannot imagine the true level of numbing horror. We see the ruined cities, the areas that are still too hot to enter, and the charred remains of thousands of bodies, but we do not grasp the horrors. How

can we? It is as beyond our experience as some of our developments would have been beyond Edward Stalker and his comrades.

Was Edward Stalker a monster, as some have suggested, or a man forced by circumstances to do what he had to do to preserve some form of American civilisation? The question, I fear, remains in your hands. I await your answers with interest.

The End