

**MINERVA**

**by**

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## Prologue

Peter O'Toole winced as his finger touched the pan. He turned off the oven but left the wings inside; no need to waste the heat. O'Toole walked over to the faucet and let it run for a moment, checking it with another finger to make sure the water was cold before putting his tender skin under it. The burn wasn't bad at all, but thirty seconds of cold water now would prevent a possible blister later.

The blare of the stadium crowd suddenly cut off. *Great, the dish acts up in the fourth quarter*, O'Toole thought. He glanced up at the widescreen television, which was easily visible from the Formica kitchen countertop, expecting to see a blank screen. Instead he saw the bold letters proclaiming BREAKING NEWS.

The screen shifted to a news anchor, detached and professional. He informed twenty-five-year-old Peter O'Toole that a passenger jet taking off from LaGuardia Airport had had an explosion and crashed into the icy water. There were no reports yet from rescue crews, but everyone on board was feared dead. The scene shifted to helicopter footage of the smoking wreck.

O'Toole's stomach dropped out as he glanced at the clock. That probably wasn't Mary's flight. He'd never really thought about it before, but surely LaGuardia had dozens of planes leaving every hour. Yes, Mary's flight would have been taking off at about that time, but that didn't prove anything.

O'Toole snapped out of his momentary paralysis and picked up the phone. But then he stopped once again. *Who the fuck do you call when you think your wife's plane just crashed?*

The news anchor interrupted the helicopter reporter. He informed Peter O'Toole that Airways Flight 361, headed for Houston, had crashed moments after taking off from LaGuardia Airport. Preliminary reports suggested that all 186 passengers and crew were killed.

The phone slipped out of O'Toole's hand and banged against the linoleum floor.

## One

O'Toole shuffled his feet as the guard led him to the holding cell. He couldn't tell if his emerging headache were due to his first—and last—barfight, the obscene amount of liquor he'd had, or (most likely) some combination of the two.

"In here," the guard said, beckoning to the cell. Inside were three other prisoners: An Asian and black man sat on the cell bench, listening to a small yet wiry older white man. The older man appeared to be homeless: he wore an ancient three-piece suit in a horrible shade of green, and his originally white dress shirt had a yellowed collar and was missing several buttons. His shoes were dusty black wing tips, through the holes of which the man's green dress socks were visible. The older man had (like O'Toole) not shaved in days, and what white hair he still had protruded from his large head in an excited tangle. Despite his tattered appearance, the other two men seemed quite intent on his words.

The opening of the cell door caused the older man to turn around and face O'Toole and the guard.

"Ah, the agent of the State delivers us yet another citizen-ruler," the older man said, beaming with glee. "And as usual, the humble public servant comports himself with courtesy, professionalism, and respect."

As O'Toole entered the cell, the guard muttered to him, "Have fun. Looks like today's lesson is Remedial Politics for Gangbangers."

"Hey fuck *dat* man," the black prisoner said. "The NYPD is the biggest gang there is."

The guard ignored him and cast a quick look of disgust at the older man. He closed the cell and walked back down the corridor.

O'Toole collapsed onto a bench on the far side of the cell. The older man resumed his "lesson" to the two others.

"Now Michael, I cannot stress this enough," he said to the Asian, a man who looked in his late twenties and seemed quite nervous. "Yes, your family is not going to

approve of what has happened. They are going to be disappointed. But keep in mind that you have done absolutely nothing wrong.”

Michael’s head, which had drooped down so that he stared at the floor, snapped back up. He looked with anxious curiosity at the older man.

“That’s right, you did nothing wrong. Think about it: What exactly have you done? There were poor farmers in Colombia, growing a plant. There were rich kids in America, who wanted the plant. And what did you do? Why, you helped them to make a mutually advantageous exchange.

“Did you hurt anyone? No. Did you steal anything from anybody? No. So it’s perfectly understandable for you to regret the pain this will cause your family, and maybe you wish you had done something else with your life. But do *not* let them”—the man pointed a thumb in the direction of the corridor—“convince you that you’re a bad person. You must not give them that power over you.”

“Yeah I know what you’re sayin,” Michael said in a weak voice. “But those cops told me I was fucked. They said I could get twenty-five *years* for that shit.”

“Those *fucking* pigs,” muttered the black man. Michael swallowed hard and wiped his right eye with the back of his left wrist.

“Michael Michael,” the older man said in a gentle voice. “You are absolutely *not* going to spend twenty-five years in prison. I would be surprised if you served more than five.”

Michael’s throat trembled. “Yeah but five *years*...”

“Michael, look at me. You are a gifted individual and I want you to use your powers of reason. What’s done is done. You must look at this as a learning experience. Now you know what the State can and will do to its opponents. The hopelessness in your life? *This*,” he held up his hands to signify the cell, “is its ultimate cause. There is a war going on, Michael, and you are now one of its official casualties.

“It’s regrettable, of course. Just as a soldier wounded in combat laments his fate. But the soldier is not *ashamed* of himself. He is *proud* of what he has done, and he would gladly do it again.

“I know you don’t believe me right now, but I assure you, you will one day walk out of prison as a new man, a *stronger* man. The scales will have fallen from your eyes.

We live in an unjust society, Michael. And in such a society, the place for a just man is prison.”

“What in the *hell* are you talking about?” O’Toole could no longer restrain himself. The glib bum had finally worn away his patience. O’Toole looked sternly at Michael. “Son, I’m sorry about your situation. But what you need to do is get yourself a lawyer, and stop taking advice from your cellmate.” Having spoken his piece, O’Toole laid himself back on the bench.

There was a momentary silence. The older man broke it.

“Forgive me, good sir, but you seem to have given young Michael contradictory counsel. He is in the paradoxical position of either listening to you—one of his cellmates—and thus spurning your advice, or of following your suggestion, by disregarding your suggestions.”

O’Toole was flabbergasted, but in no mood to argue. “Look,” he said calmly, “I realize your lifestyle is a bit...different from mine, and I’m not saying it’s a bad one. But some of us have li—responsibilities on the outside. And I *really* don’t think you should be telling some young kid that it’s romantic to be a coke dealer.”

The older man waited a moment before speaking.

“Tell me, do you believe Michael here deserves to be in prison for what he has done? You are in here for violence. He is in here for commerce.”

O’Toole realized that his eye must have been quite a sight. He sighed. “Look, I don’t want to argue with you; I’ve got a bad headache. I didn’t mean to offend you, and I appreciate that you’re trying to cheer this guy up.” O’Toole rested his head back on the bench and closed his eyes.

“Your response intrigues me,” the older man began after another short pause. “This boy’s life as he knows it has now ended. You feel perfectly justified in challenging my comments, and perfectly qualified to offer him your advice, yet you have neither the will nor apparently the ability at the moment to engage in abstract thought. It seemed you very much *did* ‘want to argue’ a moment ago when you chastised me.”

*What a nightmare*, O’Toole thought. After a moment he relaxed. *Well, can’t blame the guy; this is probably a treat for him to get a roof over his head and have an audience.*

“Look, I’ve got no problem if you want to legalize drugs. That’s fine; if they legalize it, more power to you. I’ll even sign a referendum on it. But right now there are serious legal penalties for dealing cocaine, and I think you’re doing a disservice by advising people when you’re not a legal expert.”

The black man chuckled. “Don’ know who he’s dealin with,” he muttered.

The older man said to O’Toole, “Again your position intrigues me. You feel yourself competent to participate in a referendum on the matter; you are willing to cast your vote for one side of the question. Yet you are unwilling to discuss *why* you would vote in this way. Would you have been so cavalier with, say, the internment of Japanese Americans during World War II? The Nazis weren’t the only ones with concentration camps during that war, you know.”

*Here we go...* O’Toole considered for a moment, then decided it wasn’t worth it. “Sir, I’m not going to have a debate with you. You’ve obviously put a great deal of thought into your beliefs, and I respect that. I’m sorry to have interrupted your discussion. Please resume it and I won’t bother you again.”

The older man smiled and looked back at the other two prisoners. His voice returned to its previous level, and O’Toole closed his eyes again.

“Although our new guest does not want to discuss the matter,” the older man said in a gentle voice, “it is worth considering why *certain* drugs—not all of them, mind you—are currently illegal.

“Some say it’s to reduce crime. After all, look at the condition of inner cities, and the behavior of drug dealers.” The older man paused to survey his audience. The younger man, Michael, was staring at the floor. But the other fellow had a grin on his face and was paying close attention.

“But if we all agree that an addict will do anything, even steal or kill, to get his next fix, then why in the world would we enact policies that make drugs such as cocaine hundreds of times more expensive than they would be if legalized? Will that not simply force a junkie to commit *more* crimes to finance his habit?

“And yes, what of gang warfare? Do the drugs themselves drive dealers to shoot each other? Why then don’t liquor store owners take contracts out on each other? No, it is not *drugs* that cause violence and crime, but drug *prohibition*. Think about it: The

government sends around groups of heavily armed men, who will kidnap and hold hostage anyone caught selling certain substances. And then everyone wonders why reckless and violent individuals end up being the ones who sell these substances.”

O’Toole chuckled. *He’s got it all figured out*, he thought and smiled. He found that if he viewed the older man’s monologue as a form of entertainment, he could relax and even drift into a light sleep.

## Two

*Kcc-uhhhhh!* The aluminum bat reverberated as Andy foul tipped the ball off to his right. Andy had never played organized baseball; his practice had consisted of outings to the cages at Putt Putt. His hands were really starting to sting, and he was ready to go.

But he couldn't let the other guys know that. This was the first time he'd hung out with them after school; the other times it had just been in study hall or the occasional lunch. (Tom and Nick were taking an art class with nobody else in it, and so their table would be wide open at that lunch and they'd usually call Andy over when he walked by with his tray.)

"Holy shit man, that's the fourth fucking tip in a row," Tom DiGatano yelled from the shallow outfield. "Just connect with the damn thing. This is homerun derby, not the fucking World Series."

The others in the field laughed and followed Tom's lead. "Yeah, that guy's like stepping out of the batter's box to adjust his gloves and shit," Freddy Malone yelled from left field. "This doesn't count for your slugging percentage," Jim Valentino quipped, but the sophomore said it so softly that not everyone really heard him.

Andy forced a smile. He really just wanted to get the hell out of there and go home. He glanced over at the parking lot to see if anybody else from school might be around to witness him. It'd be cool if kids the next day asked him about it and he could just say, "Yeah, I was out hitting the ball a bit with Tom and Nick. We weren't playing or anything, just a little homerun derby."

He didn't even care if he hit it far. Andy just wanted, like Tom had said, to connect with the thing and go back out in the field.

*Pom!* Andy swung the bat cleanly through the ball and watched it come down a little past second base. Tom jogged up and caught it.

"All right I'm up," Tom said as he tossed the ball underhanded to his brother. He jogged up to the plate and took the bat from an eager Andy.



“Okay you got my spot,” Tom said. He apparently forgot that Andy needed his glove. (Andy hadn’t had one in his locker like the others.) Andy considered not making a big deal of it and just running out there to field balls without a glove, but he reconsidered and thought he’d just get ripped on if he did that. So Andy simply stood there while Tom took a few swings to loosen up.

Andy stared at Tom’s back while he took another swing. Tom DiGatano was hands down the toughest guy Andy had ever known about. He was at least six-foot-two, and had to weigh over 230. People said Tom could bench 300, but that was probably bullshit. Jim Deacon though said he’d personally seen Tom throw up 250, and Jim was usually pretty good about stuff like that.

But it was more than just their size; Tom and his buddies *liked* to fight. They were the guys who went around to church festivals just to fuck with tough guys from other schools. And the DiGatano brothers always won.

“What are you, looking at my ass or something?” Tom demanded.

“N-no,” Andy said and managed a laugh. He had been embarrassed to ask about the glove, but that was nothing compared to being caught staring. “I just need—can I use your glove again?”

Tom looked puzzled for a second and then said, “Yeah no shit you can take it. You’re not gonna barehand the shit out there.”

Andy chuckled and picked up the glove. As he ran to center field (where unfortunately he’d have to catch more balls than where he started in left field) he noticed the two men sitting in lawn chairs. They were on the grass by the parking lot, about two or three hundred feet away from Andy. Judging by the pile of beer cans next to them, the men had been sitting watching for a while. But Andy hadn’t noticed them before: He’d been concentrating on the plate when he’d been in left field, and when he was up to bat he’d been focused on Nick.

“Fuck!” Tom yelled as he foul tipped the ball. “Yesterday I was killin the ball.”

“Sure it wasn’t a softball?” Freddy Malone yelled.

“Yeah I hear *you* got soft balls,” Nick yelled back. Everyone laughed wildly at this. Nick threw another pitch, overhand but not too fast.

*Ping!!* Tom had just crushed the ball. It sailed well over Andy (who'd been standing where Tom had been, a dozen yards behind second base) and landed far in the outfield. It bounced and rolled, coming to stop about ten feet from the two men.

"You just fuckin *killed* that thing DiGatano," Jim Valentino announced. Tom just nodded his head.

"Hey boss a little help?" Nick yelled at the two men.

"You that kid's boss?" Jack Quinn asked Jim Knight.

"Nope. You?" Jim asked in return.

"Nope," Quinn responded. He tossed his fourth can on the grass and opened another.

"Hey chief, you wanna throw that ball over here?" Tom yelled. Andy of course could have run to get the ball, but he decided to hold still.

The men continued to drink their beer. It wasn't just that they were ignoring Tom, Andy realized. They were both looking straight at Tom. They were *purposefully* ignoring him.

"You know these guys?" Tom asked Nick as he walked toward the mound.

"Nah, they don't look familiar," Nick answered. The two brothers walked toward the ball. The other three fell in behind them.

"You guys like the show so far?" Tom asked as he and Nick drew close to the men. The men just sipped their beer, staring at Tom.

Something just didn't sit right with Tom. He wasn't at all afraid to fight grown men; he'd had plenty of practice with that, including his father. But normally when Tom got hostile with somebody, the guy...well, *reacted*. But here he was, holding a bat, and these guys were just sitting there. Sure, they looked solid, and the black guy was pretty fucking big, but *still*: he was holding a bat.

"You guys cops or something?" Tom demanded. He and Nick had stopped about five feet from the men in their lawn chairs.

"Nope. You?" Quinn answered. Jim snorted.

“You know,” Tom said after a moment. “You’re lucky I don’t crack your fuckin head in with this.” Tom tapped the bat gently on the palm of his left hand.

“It’s not luck,” Quinn said immediately.

*He doesn’t think I’ll do it.* Tom took a warmup swing, bringing the bat within about a foot of the white guy’s face. Nick felt his adrenaline kick in, and sized up the black guy. *This fucker doesn’t know who he’s dealin with.*

Quinn did not flinch when the bat *swooshed* in front of his face. He continued to stare at the boy’s eyes. Jim looked for pockets on the other boys. Most of them had sweatpants on, and the one with jeans wouldn’t be a problem. Quinn checked his footing but kept his eyes on the boy.

“The windup, the pitch,” Tom said as he began his swing. He truly aimed for Quinn’s head, but he didn’t swing as hard as he could. He was quite confident Quinn would duck or put up his hand. But if he didn’t, Tom didn’t want to actually kill him.

As Tom brought the bat around, Quinn leaped out of his chair with both arms outstretched, his left palm facing up. He grabbed the bat with both hands and butted his head into Tom’s nose, before quickly snapping it back. Having absorbed the swing into his left arm and chest, Quinn rotated the bat clockwise, slamming it into the side of Tom’s face. The blow loosened Tom’s grip on the bat, making it easy for Quinn to yank it towards himself, bringing it parallel to the ground. Then Quinn shoved it back toward Tom, giving him a sharp jab with the end of the bat, just below his sternum. This knocked the wind out of Tom. He let go completely of the bat and reflexively hunched over. Quinn yanked the bat back away from Tom, and gripped it properly. He swung it up and over his shoulder, as if he were chopping wood. He brought the bat squarely down on Tom’s back. Tom crumpled to the ground.

Nick and the others backed up several feet. Within mere seconds, the man had taken the bat from Tom and laid him out. Tom groaned and began wiggling his arms and legs.

“Whoa whoa chill out man,” Nick said. Quinn sat back down, laying the bat across his legs. Nick and Freddy Malone helped Tom stand up. They both wrapped an arm around their necks and walked him back toward the field. Andy and Jim Valentino followed them, but checked every few feet to make sure Quinn and Jim stayed seated.

“Hey kids don’t forget your *bat*,” Quinn yelled as he threw the bat like a tomahawk at the boys. Although it flew several feet over their heads, Andy couldn’t help ducking down as it passed them. Jim Valentino picked it up.

“We should probably get going,” Jim said as the boys collected the rest of their things from the grass. “Those meat heads might call the cops.”

“Yeah,” Quinn said, searching the other baseball fields. They were empty except for a small group of younger boys playing soccer. “Looks like I had the wrong time for Tara’s game anyway. Lemme finish my beer.”

## Three

O'Toole walked down the corridor, counting off the numbers on the office doors. The campus was spread out in the Village, and O'Toole had had to ask several young people before finding the building. As he approached 824, he saw the old man walk out and close the door. O'Toole smiled; the old man was wearing a quaint but distinctive gray suit and vest, and a ridiculous red bowtie with black dollar signs on it. Unlike the earlier night, the old man's hair was now neatly combed. As he looked up from locking the door, the old man's face beamed with recognition.

"Hello Mr. O'Toole! Need to brush up on your microeconomics?"

"Oh, no," O'Toole said after a moment. He was stunned that the professor had known his name. "I just saw you on TV and thought I'd swing by."

"Well, I appreciate your swinging, but right now I'm headed for class." His voice dropped as he added, "It would be difficult to hold myself up as a paragon of courtesy if I kept my students waiting."

"Oh, I'm sorry to have bothered you," O'Toole said quickly. It hadn't occurred to him that the professor might have *work* to do. "Can I come by some other time?"

"Not at all, come to the class." The old man stopped to look back at O'Toole, who had stopped walking and looked uncertain. "I'm serious, it will be fine. It's an Honors seminar anyway; the discussion might even be interesting."

O'Toole shrugged and followed the professor. "Just out of curiosity," he said, "how did you know my name?"

The old man stopped and turned. "Oh my, I've forgotten that although I know who you are, and you know who I am, and moreover that now I know that you know who I am, and you now know that I know who you are, that this is not a solid foundation for a relationship. Please excuse me. You gave a talk at the Business School three years ago, Mr. O'Toole. I recognized you from the cell, and looked up the old schedules to recall your name.

"And, as you must know since you found your way to my office, my name is David Mason. But please, I must get to class. We can discuss this afterwards."

O'Toole fell in behind Mason as he resumed walking, and tried to suppress a smirk. He had known the man was eccentric, but he had thought it might largely be an act. The performance in the cell had been for an audience, and obviously the remarks to reporters (in which Mason had explained his purpose for publicly refusing to pay his taxes, and had promised that he would, if convicted, go on a "horny strike" in which he would "refuse to masturbate in prison") could only have been a childish publicity stunt. But apparently the man in person was just as strange.

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Mason looked up from his notes and scanned the classroom. Several of the students immediately terminated their conversations when he caught their eyes, but it took a few moments for the last murmurs to die away. Mason had long ago learned to use the students' greatest weakness—the need for approval from their peers—to manipulate them. As a dictator surely realized in his own realm, Mason recognized that he had no real power over his students, should they openly defy him. If half the class decided to prevent the transmission of knowledge, they could do so. Fortunately, Mason also knew that the students had other concerns of more immediate importance than disrupting his classroom, and that any individual troublemaker could be quickly subdued by humiliating him in front of the other students.

"All right, just to refresh our memories, today we're discussing the Dennett excerpts, and you need to read Dawkins for next time. Then you'll all be able to write essays on why 'selfish altruism' is not a contradiction in terms."

A girl raised her hand. Mason nodded his head, knowing what she would ask. "So is that going to be a question on the final? Could you please repeat it?"

"Yes, Miss Lancaster, I could repeat it," Mason began, "but I will not." The girl's face dropped. "If I were to repeat every sentence, you would all learn only half as much." The class laughed. "And no, that will not be on the exam."

The class laughed again. Julie's face blushed, and she struggled to remember exactly what Professor Mason had said about altruism. She wasn't sure if he now meant that the Dawkins material wouldn't be on the test, or just the fact that he couldn't repeat

every sentence. Most of the time she didn't understand why the class laughed when it did at Professor Mason's comments.

"Professor?" another student, braver than Julie, said as he raised his hand. "What's your view on evolution?"

"I think it would be a good thing for most of you," Mason said, pausing just long enough to signal that this was a joke.

"Aww, come on," the student persisted after the class's laughter subsided.

"Well," Mason said, casting a glance at the back row in which O'Toole sat at a desk, "since the purpose of these readings is to understand the concept of spontaneous order, rather than any particular empirical application of the idea, I suppose it doesn't matter if I share my personal opinion." Mason saw the students perk up as they realized he was about to make a rare exception to his normal rule.

"First, let me concede upfront that the theory of Darwinian evolution is the greatest thing to ever happen to atheism. The theory provides an undeniable crutch for those who deny the existence, or at least the necessity, of an intelligent creator. However, this alone does not disqualify the theory; after all, the truth certainly has implications."

Brian Jones tried to conceal his skepticism. He braced himself for a long-winded exposition defending the absurd idea that a dinosaur could turn into a man. Mason was yet another self-styled "scientist" who didn't even do real science, but instead sat in his office conducting thought experiments. Nonetheless Brian listened intently, hoping to pounce on any flaw in the argument.

"I would say that there are five or six major points of contention in the debate over evolution." Mason let the point sink in as he surveyed the room. "I personally am only competent to judge on three or four of these controversies; the rest require proficiency in biology and archaeology that I simply do not possess.

"However, on those points which I feel competent to render a verdict, I always agree with the proponent of evolution, and disagree with the critics of the theory. Beyond that, there is a definite sense in which the Darwinian explanation is too *elegant* to be wrong. Let me offer an analogy: Suppose we want to pinpoint the epicenter of an earthquake..."

Brian Jones couldn't believe what he was hearing. The charlatan wasn't even going to argue the material; he was simply going to switch the discussion to one about earthquakes!

"...Now when the earthquake occurs, shockwaves travel away, through the ground, in all directions. So supposing the epicenter is here"—Mason colored in a circle on the blackboard—"the shockwaves will move out like so." Mason drew larger and larger concentric circles around the solid dot.

"Now it turns out that certain types of waves move at different speeds through the earth's crust. So if we have an observation station at some point"—Mason drew a small square several feet from the solid dot—"then immediately following an earthquake, the people listening at the station will receive the fastest waves first." Mason paused to draw a long arrow from the solid dot in the direction of the square. "Only after some elapsed time will the slower waves hit the station." Mason drew another arrow, this one shorter than the first, in the direction of the square.

"What is quite fascinating about this is that seismologists can use this single number, the time delay between hearing one type of wave and another, slower one, in order to calculate the *distance* of the source of the waves, which is of course the epicenter of the earthquake."

Mason could see confusion on the faces of many of the students. Brian Jones was smirking behind his left hand, but Mason was used to such immaturity.

"The principle is the same that you use to estimate the distance of a thunderstorm. Light waves travel faster than sound waves. Therefore, when you see a bolt of lightning, you can count off the seconds that elapse before you hear the thunderclap. This difference allows you to calculate how far away the lightning bolt occurred, because scientists know the relative speeds of light and sound waves. It's the same with the waves traveling through the earth's crust.

"Now then, the interesting part." Mason erased everything on the blackboard except the square. "Unlike the observer of a lightning bolt, the scientists at the observation station cannot so easily tell the direction from which the shockwaves are coming. All they know for certain is the gap between the initial reception times of different wave types, and consequently all they can say is that the epicenter of the



earthquake is at some specific distance from the station. But they *cannot* say in what *direction* the epicenter lies. What this means, therefore, is that any one station can only confine the location of the epicenter to a circle of a definite radius, with the station lying in the center of the circle.” Mason drew a large circle around the square.

“But don’t give up yet!” Mason said with a twinkle. “For if we have another station over here, then its staff can calculate the distance of the epicenter based on the gap that *they* experience.” Mason drew a second square, and a second circle around it, so that the two circles overlapped in two points.

“Now what has happened is this: The first station knows the epicenter is, say, 75 miles away. That means the epicenter has to be somewhere on this circle.” Mason pointed to the first circle. “But the people at the second station know that the epicenter is, say, 45 miles away from them, meaning the epicenter must be somewhere along *this* circle. Of course, putting the two facts together leads us to conclude that the epicenter must be at one of these two points, where the circles intersect each other.

“Finally, if we had a third station, we could pinpoint the exact location of the epicenter.” Mason drew a third square, and carefully drew a third circle around it, making sure it touched one of the points where the first two circles intersected. “And this, the method of triangulation, allows us to locate the source of the earthquake. There is only one point that is the proper distance from each of the three observation stations, and so it must be the source of the shockwaves.”

Mason waited for a full thirty seconds to allow the entire argument to seep in. The students would need to understand it before he could use it as an analogy.

“Now then, let us suppose that after this particular earthquake, seismologists announce that they believe the epicenter is likely to be somewhere near this point.” Mason pointed to the spot where the three circles met.

“But then along come a group of cynics.” Mason put down the piece of chalk and faced the class, now ignoring the board. “They point out, quite correctly, that this suggestion of the location of the epicenter is merely a *theory*. These critics further point out that the seismologists are not making a *prediction*, but rather offering an untestable assertion. Indeed, the most articulate of the cynics write books, explaining that the scientists involved are merely *assuming* that the earth’s crust is comparable to that found

at a few dig sites. The scientists, after all, have never actually *measured* the speed of shockwaves through the ground around this point.” Mason turned to gesture at the board.

“In fact, based on the explanation of earthquakes given in a book passed down first orally and then copied by hand, originating thousands of years ago, the critics of the scientists offer their own rival theory: They say that the earthquake must be here,” Mason drew another circle and filled it in on the far side of the leftmost square. “This is because...” Mason paused to dream up something clever. “...the earth was created shell first, and then the insides were pumped into a hole, which was then sealed. This is the location of that hole, and consequently *all* earthquakes originate here.

“Incidentally,” Mason said with a charming smile, “the reason the scientists were so completely fooled is that the *true* composition of the earth’s core—as explained in the book—is extremely complex, and thus not at all approximated by the crude models of the scientists. Brilliant scholars, ignored by the mainstream seismologists, can actually demonstrate with numerical methods that the readings at the observation posts are entirely consistent with the idea that the epicenter is here,” Mason pointed at the second colored dot, “and not at the place where the scientists had conjectured.”

Mason put the chalk down again, and sat down. After a moment of staring at his desk, he looked back up to face the class.

“I think that’s all I shall say on this subject. If you have not entirely learned my position on evolution, then my attempt has been successful. Now then, whose turn is it to summarize the reading for today?” The students shuffled their things as they took out stapled photocopies.

“Who had the Dennett piece?” Mason asked, looking around the room.

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After the last student had left, Mason walked out into the hallway where O’Toole was waiting. Mason headed back toward his office, and O’Toole fell in with him.

“I hope you were not too bored,” Mason said in a light tone. “Oh, in case you caught it, I think I may have botched the earth science analogy in the beginning. Halfway through the lecture I realized that it may not be different types of waves that the scientists

measure, but rather the same shockwave traveling through different types of rock. It doesn't affect anything, but I don't want to be 'teaching' false things."

"Oh, no problem," O'Toole said. "And the class was fine; I wasn't bored."

Mason nodded his head in appreciation.

"So tell me," O'Toole asked after he realized Mason was not going to reply, "did you actually attend my talk a few years ago?"

"How could I forget it?" Mason asked with a large smile. "You actually invented a better mousetrap! And you made a bundle of money in the process. You symbolize America."

O'Toole blushed.

"Honestly, Mr. O'Toole, that was one of the finest talks I've ever heard at the Business School. Those MBAs learned more from your fifty minutes than from a semester in any of their classes. I'm not patronizing you; it was a wonderful talk."

The two men stopped outside Mason's office. Mason unlocked his door and opened it.

"But of course, you didn't come here to reminisce about your presentation. You want to know what I was doing in that jail cell, and why I was dressed so shabbily."

O'Toole nodded his head as he walked into the office. Mason closed the door behind him and sat down. He gestured for O'Toole to sit as well.

"The second question is easy enough: I have frequent occasions to be arrested, and I am conducting an experiment to see how my treatment by the police is influenced by my appearance. You happened to catch me on a night when I wished to appear indigent."

"And what of the first question?" O'Toole asked.

"I am a philosophical anarchist, Mr. O'Toole." Mason paused to detect any reaction from O'Toole, but found none. "I long ago promised myself that I would either live in a free society, or else be imprisoned for its advocacy. Inasmuch as I have utterly failed in the former goal, I must content myself with rather futile but nonetheless amusing protests against the government."

O'Toole thought for a moment before speaking.

“I imagine you’ve heard all sorts of objections to your beliefs.” O’Toole paused again. “You certainly seem to be quite intelligent, so I realize you must have excellent reasons for thinking the way you do...”

“Here, this should help,” Mason said as he pulled a book off of his cluttered shelves. “It’s a novel I wrote many years ago.” Mason smiled to himself. “Back when I actually thought it would make a difference.”

O’Toole took the paperback from Mason and examined it. It was a novel titled *Minerva*. As with Mason’s bowtie, black dollar signs littered the book cover’s deep red background. Aside from the title, there were no other words on the book, not even a designation for its author. And although most people would overlook the fact, O’Toole noticed that there was no ISBN bar code on the back. He opened the book but found no explanatory material on the inside cover. The book simply began with “CHAPTER ONE.”

“Not much foreplay, is there?” O’Toole asked. He was quite certain his suggestive reference would be perfectly acceptable, given the professor’s antics. As he flipped through the book, he paused at a page with just two words on it:

*For Rachael*

O'Toole didn't know what to make of this. Whether it was a device for attention or a simple error by the independent publisher, he couldn't tell.

"I was a different man when I wrote that book, Mr. O'Toole." Mason looked at O'Toole, his face full of apparently genuine anguish. "I do not mean to insult you, sir."

O'Toole raised an eyebrow. How could this charming and entertaining old man possibly *insult* him?

"But I assure you, my understanding of certain social problems is so...*clear*." Mason's voice trailed off, and again his attention seemed to leave the room. After a moment he looked back at O'Toole. "Can you possibly imagine the sheer *excitement* it would cause a cynical young economist, to realize that, in essence, the hippies were right? That the sociological analyses of John Lennon and Bob Dylan far surpassed that of my Nobel laureate colleagues?"

"And that...worst of all...what we were doing was *evil*?"

O'Toole didn't know how to respond. This was turning out to be one of the most unusual conversations in his entire life. But the old man seemed on the verge of tears, as if he were discussing the unfamiliar foibles of his deceased wife, without realizing that O'Toole had no idea what he was talking about.

Perhaps sensing his discomfort—although O'Toole was certain that his face conveyed nothing—Mason's twinkle immediately returned. "Forgive me, Mr. O'Toole. After realizing that government as we know it was completely unnecessary—actually no, after realizing that government was the *creator* of all social ills—I decided that it was my duty to bring this message to the masses. And yes, you are perfectly correct; my novel left much to be desired on the criterion of marketability. At the time I was under the impression that it would gain underground notoriety, and inevitably find its way onto everyone's night stand. But of course, the federal government still collects trillions of dollars per year."

Mason smiled broadly. "It would be quite embarrassing for me to face the true wielders of power in our society. I actually thought I would bring them to their knees, yet all I have to show for it is a tenured position at a mid-rank university." Mason looked up at his ceiling, lost in thought. "It honestly took *decades* for me to realize that these unseen enemies—the ones who controlled the politicians and the CEOs and the oil

companies and all the rest—that these nemeses were not grossly underrating me, as I so smugly thought. No,” Mason looked back at O’Toole, “these men were *amused* by me.”

There was a long pause. O’Toole finally broke it. “Well, I’ll certainly get a copy of your book. Is it...available?” O’Toole was worried about its lack of a bar code.

Mason’s face visibly drooped. “Mr. O’Toole, again I apologize. My behavior has been nothing short of obscene. You paid me the courtesy to visit and I repay you with unjustified assertions that I could indeed have been a contender. By all means, the book is yours.

“Oh, you might like this,” Mason said as he opened a drawer of his desk and flipped through a file folder. He pulled out a newspaper clipping enclosed in a transparent cover.

O’Toole took the sheet and examined it. It was a page from the *Village Verdict*, a local, artsy publication that he never read. On it was a book review of David Mason’s *Minerva*.

“It came out the year after I self-published my book,” Mason said. “Go ahead and read it; it’s quite entertaining.”

O’Toole held the article up and began to read:

*Menerva: A Review of David Mason’s cult classic*

by Tara McClare

Well what can I say? I finally broke down—“You gotta read this book, Tara! It’s *awesome!*!”—and read *Minerva*, that meticulously detailed blueprint of a parallel universe that has had right-wingers in such a tizzy all these years.

And you know what? It wasn’t half bad. We have to give Mason credit. After all, the guy’s an *economist*, for Chrissake. You know the type: Mason’s the sort of guy (and I’m not even making this stuff up, honest!) who comes up with formulas for insurance companies to calculate the dollar value of a human life (with richer people getting higher marks, of course), and who testifies before Congress on the “efficient” number of homicides per year (hint: it’s not zero).

But Mason is more than just an economist. He’s a *consistent* economist. That is, Mason takes the economist’s notion of “inefficiency”—i.e. that the status quo is B-A-D whenever the economists would prefer to live in an alternative world where we all did

things their way—to its logical conclusion, and discovers that—heavens to Betsy!—the world is full of injustice. Armed with the tools of his economic “science,” Mason pronounces moral judgment on any social arrangement falling outside the purview of a laissez-faire free market. Mason doesn’t just want to cut the government; he wants to get rid of it altogether. And, just like a certain darling Russian thinker, Mason isn’t afraid to write an entire novel just in order to smuggle his political views into the mainstream. (Elsewhere I’ve referred to these books as Trojan horse literature.)

But as I say, the book wasn’t *terrible*. Aside from their freakish endowments of craftiness (obviously Mason’s favorite trait), not to mention their generous helpings of conceit and egomania, the characters seemed fairly realistic. (Well, the *male* characters did. Fortunately, Mason only introduces one major female character, who will no doubt become an object of desire for America’s exploding population of adolescent libertarian boys. Admittedly, the book’s romantic scenes were a bit wooden, but what can you expect? An economist will argue that incentives and information costs make it better to jerk off than get a handjob.) The plot, though somewhat far fetched and interspersed with Batman and Robin cliffhangers, was interesting enough. (Of course, as a red-blooded American, Mason had to include not one but *two* wars.) And, I must say, the dialogue was rather snappy. You can even understand where Mason is coming from, given his obvious naïveté.

There is, finally, a certain *style* to Mason’s writing, which I can’t quite put my finger on. Despite the herky jerky flashbacks and uneven pacing (which at times made me wonder if Mason wrote his novel in the throes of a severe bout with diarrhea), in the book you can definitely sense shades of a Larry McMurtry and Stephen King. But the problem is, Mason’s characters are all designed to fulfill his propaganda needs. And in order to boil the message down for the faithful, the book is less a novel than a script for a Broadway show. (That might even be too kind. *Minerva* would be a *comic book* if not for Mason’s prodigious vocabulary.) Although they are undeniably clever, Mason’s characters are still artificial. Try as he might, Mason hasn’t turned out good literature, since he hasn’t tried to appeal to “us” but instead to those who are afraid of “us” and (gasp!) the decisions we might make at the ballot box.

Well, I suppose I should stop psychoanalyzing the author and get to his product. The book has some tacky stunts, like a character reading a book called *Minerva*. (That had my sci-fi acquaintance bouncing off the walls. He was convinced there should have been an “infinite ripple” from this silly ploy, like when you’re in a changing room and see a zillion of yourself in the mirror.) And for those with darker skin than mine (and no, that doesn’t include *everyone!*), be wary of a ridiculous encounter in which Mason has a character snap and appeal to every stereotype the reader might harbor. Nonetheless, the



book is entertaining in its own way, and by the end—with young Danny heading back home with his head held high—you feel as exhilarated (or not) as you would at the end of a Hitchcock movie.

In conclusion, I'm not saying David Mason's *Minerva* is bad. I'm just saying, unless you have a political science book report coming up, there are so many *better* books you could be reading.

O'Toole handed the clipping back to Mason. "I'm not so sure she liked your book."

Mason smiled. "Lovely girl, that Tara McClare. Do you know her work? She's got quite an underground following. Whether it's her looks or her talent, is harder to say."

"Oh, yes, I've certainly heard of her though I believe this is the first thing I've read, or at least, this is the first time I've read her and known it," O'Toole said, though he couldn't name a single local writer at all, let alone recognize this one.

After a slight lull, O'Toole lifted the novel and said, "Well, I'm looking forward to this..."

"Yes! Enjoy! My door is always open."

O'Toole got the sense that Mason wanted him to leave. He nodded and left the office.

As he went down the elevator, O'Toole realized that Mason had indeed wanted him to leave, but only so that he could get home and read *Minerva*.

## Four

Matt King ran a hand through his jet black, gel-stiffened hair as he examined himself in the mirror. Although only seventeen, the boy of average height and medium build could always pass himself off as much older. Matt took a step back from the mirror, ran his dazzling blue eyes up and down, and proclaimed, “The only question now is, which lucky lady is taking *this* home.”

Matt left the cramped bathroom and worked his way through the crowd back to the bar. He was wearing his East Village camo, and decided that this would best be complemented by a wine cooler. He contemplated a serious night of hogging—there was really no other word to adequately capture his present disposition—and so he would no doubt end up focusing on insecure girls. (*I seem to do that a lot. Well, practice makes perfect*, Matt thought.) Normally this beverage strategy would leave him open to wiseass comments from the dipshits who’d be hanging around the girl (or girls, if he played his cards right) Matt would end up fucking that night, but he frankly didn’t feel like that bullshit right now. He’d take the easy approach and go sit next to a girl all by herself. Matt could easily find some NYU freshman who was considered hot in her hometown but just recently realized that no matter how slutty she dressed, she still couldn’t compete in the big leagues. In that context, the chick drink would be a sign of vulnerability for Matt, and prove indispensable in getting her naked. Hell, for this kind of mission, Matt almost wished he could whip up a whitehead or two.

Matt paid with a ten and let the bartender keep the change. Overtipping on the initial drink had become a habit with him lately; of course it was more practical when he was buying mixed drinks, but what was five dollars?

Matt sipped his drink (...*which is basically pink water*...) with his right hand and leaned on the bar with his left forearm. He casually scanned the room from left to right. There were quite a few females in the room he’d gladly pound the shit out of, but, as always, there were plenty of other gents who were *also* aroused by luscious tits and tight asses. Matt really didn’t feel like starting a bidding war tonight. Not only was it an extra pain in the ass, but Matt couldn’t stand competing for some chick that *wasn’t even that*

*hot* damnit. What was the point of such a contest? That he'd be able to best some fucking frat boy who thought his football exploits would trump Matt's jokes? No, the only time to bring out the big guns would be when it was fair. Like at that upcoming party in the Hamptons, which his buddy in film school promised they could get into. There would certainly be models there—as in, girls who made a living by having people take their picture, not the fucking homemaker who tries on an apron for a K-Mart circular—and there was a good possibility some celebrities as well. So sure, doing a line of coke and getting all worked up to pick up a former Playmate—*especially* if she's getting hit on by some jazz musician—now *that* was something. But to get all competitive and cockblock some punk kids who were just trying to get laid? Why bother?

It really was funny though, the sorting that happens in a bar, Matt thought as he continued his surveillance. You'd occasionally see dorks trying to talk to girls they had no business talking to, but the girls dealt with that quite effectively. Good for the girls, but bad for Matt, since the only girls worth fucking in the bar were currently surrounded by groups of hardasses.

*If I could take a pill that made me think fat bald girls were smoking, would that be incredibly stupid or the best decision of my life?*

Matt's reflective musings left his mind the moment he saw her. *Whoa*, he thought. She was a fairly tall, skinny redhead sitting at a table in the corner, wearing tan dress slacks and a blue shirt with ruffled sleeves. Matt hadn't noticed her before since he hadn't seen any of the guys around the pool table try to talk to her. But when she walked over to the jukebox, Matt saw everyone staring at her ass, so he realized they had just been *afraid* of her. And as she turned and walked back to her table, Matt saw that she wasn't some girl, she was...a woman. *A lady*, in fact.

Matt acted quickly. He knew it was only a matter of time before one of the dipshits fantasizing about her and resolving to "talk to her after this beer" would realize he could ask her about the song she picked. As Matt walked quickly towards her, his mind raced for suitable introductory remarks. He threw back the wine cooler and left it on a table as he walked by. One of the guys sitting there yelled, "Hey thanks," to which his idiot friends laughed.

*Why is she coming here?* Matt wondered. She sat, looking perfectly content, sipping ostentatiously on her drink, which appeared to be a strawberry dacquiri. *What a little hottie!* Matt thought with amusement. *'I'm just sitting here being hot, sipping on a straw and pursing my lips just like I would do even if people weren't watching me.'* Matt chuckled.

The woman got back up and again walked over to the jukebox. *Little shy up top,* Matt thought after examining her chest. *But an ass to die for!*

The woman bent over at the jukebox and kept shifting her weight from one leg to the other, wiggling her behind in the process. As she leaned over, her shirt slid up her back and Matt could see the faintest hint of her red underwear.

Matt stopped dead in his tracks. He was absolutely flabbergasted.

*That fucking cocktease! Here she is, looking all sophisticated and elegant, and she's flaunting a fucking thong!?! Are these women INSANE??* Matt looked away for a moment to compose himself. *Okay, if that's how it's gonna be, I'm ready.*

Matt jogged over to the table and sat down opposite the woman's drink. He got the waitress' attention and motioned that he wanted her to come over. She nodded and gestured with her head to the guy who was fumbling through his wallet trying to pay her.

This exchange allowed Matt to be justifiably occupied as the woman walked toward him. She said nothing and sat down at the table, opposite Matt. Matt smiled and winked at the waitress and then turned his attention to the woman.

"Look," he said, looking sincerely into her eyes, "I hate music snobs as much as the next person, but *seriously*, if you ordered up the Eagles, I'll have no choice but to leave the room."

"If I played the Eagles then I'd be leaving the room with you," the woman answered immediately. "But I picked something from the White Album."

Matt was nonplussed by this response. It was neither an invitation nor a rejection. *Damn* he hated the chick strategy of uttering factual statements. If a girl started making things up, you could figure her out pretty quickly. But the *truth* could mean so many different things, you never knew what they were really saying. Fortunately the waitress walked over and provided a smooth exit.

“Two Jacks and cokes, please,” Matt said, looking deeply into the eyes of the waitress, as if she were the only other person in the room. In his present attire, the drink order was the only play that made sense. If he’d been dandied up and in a martini bar, that would have been something else. In any event, if the lady were quick, she might pick up on the grammatical novelty; it had worked once before.

“I detest Coca Cola,” the woman said to him, not the waitress.

“So don’t order it,” Matt answered with a slight look of puzzlement. “The Jack’s for me.”

The waitress looked worried. The woman looked up at her and said pleasantly, “I’ll have another dacquiri dear.”

As the waitress walked away, the woman and Matt looked into each other’s eyes. Matt honestly wondered if all he had to do was win a staring contest to take home this *fine* piece of ass.

“Do you want to hear something funny?” the woman asked, breaking the long silence.

“Sure,” Matt said, beginning to relax. This was actually turning out to be *pleasant*.

“Any minute now my dates for the night are going to come in that door.” The woman paused to sip on her drink, finishing it. “I promise you that they are the toughest men you will ever lay eyes upon. The reason I’m even *in* this bar is that they need to keep a low profile, since one of them killed a mobster in Chicago.”

Matt sat motionless and continued his smug, assured smile. He said nothing as the waitress came with the three drinks. He pulled out his money clip and paid with a hundred. The waitress apologized and went to get change.

“So how do you feel about that?” the woman asked cheerfully after a moment of additional silence.

Now this was quite unheard of, Matt decided. It was an incredibly bold move, but what did it mean? Was she just a fucking psycho? She didn’t seem it, but obviously, *every* guy who goes home with a genuine nutcase doesn’t realize he’s going to get his dick chopped off in his sleep.

Matt looked up into the air and chuckled. He extended his hand. "Where are my manners? Matt King, a pleasure to make your acquaintance."

"Tara McClare, how exhilarating to make yours," the woman said, shaking two of his fingers. Suddenly she looked over his shoulder and elation broke over her face. "Jim!" she yelled and waved her arm.

Matt's stomach fell. *Oh fuck it*, he thought as he slowly turned his head to see who this Jim cat was.

And towards him strode a black guy who looked like a Raiders lineman and a white guy who was built of brick. *Okay, so they just might eat me.*

"Hello boys, I want you to meet Matt King," Tara said. Jim and Quinn looked at Matt. Their faces were completely without expression. Even Matt was surprised by what happened next.

"You fellas both know you shouldn't be here," he said in a mature and confident voice, his eyes slowly moving back and forth between theirs. He completely ignored Tara. "Now I happen to like this place, so if you walk out right now, I'll wait a minute before I make any calls."

Quinn was alarmed. He kept track of King's hands while he surveyed the bar. No one else seemed to be with him, but then again, he hardly expected the Caruzzis to be sloppy a second time.

Jim saw Quinn stiffen and instinctively took a step closer to King. He wanted to smother him if King went for his pockets. Quinn noticed Jim's step and worried that Jim had noticed something.

Tara was smirking and couldn't stop a slight giggle from escaping her lips. Matt thought it was slight enough that the two men wouldn't have recognized it.

"Did I not make myself clear?" Matt demanded. He stared at Quinn. "*You* are going to take your nigger bodyguard and *leave*." Matt pointed to the door.

Quinn was barely looking at King. For the life of him he couldn't spot anyone in the bar, but nonetheless he decided that a straight shot for the door would be his best bet. Except for the pool table, there was really no cover to speak of, and there probably wouldn't be a window in the bathroom.

Now *this* really made no sense to Matt. He could have understood them leaving or, more likely, them kicking the everliving shit out of him. But they were just *standing there*, staring at the floor!

Matt reached across the table and grabbed Tara's slender glass. He had practiced with beer bottles and thought (...*yep*...) that he could break it on the side of his head (being careful to snap his wrist back immediately after striking). He literally snarled at the men as he brandished the jagged half of the glass.

Tara couldn't help it. She burst into laughter.

After a few moments, the men still had made no move, and continued to stare off into the distance. Matt shrugged, put the glass down, and used his two small napkins to sop up some of the spilled dacquiri. He looked back up at the men.

"Okay you got me. Whaddya drinkin?"

It dawned on Quinn that the boy had been trying to pick up Tara. He felt quite foolish. Jim looked at him and they both started laughing.

"We've got an extra Jack and coke if either of you would like that," Tara offered helpfully as she slid over to the chair by the wall, leaving hers open for Quinn.

## Five

O'Toole glanced around the small, makeshift church as Mason spoke. The teenagers and younger children were hot and bored. A brother and sister argued until their mother hushed them. The adults, most of them still dressed from work, politely paid attention.

“...and that is why, paradoxical as it may sound, minimum wage laws and other regulations are actually used by labor unions to drive wages up for white workers, while at the same time they create inner city unemployment by making unskilled labor artificially expensive.” Mason scanned the crowd and saw many cynical faces. “Think of it this way: Suppose the government decided to place a \$10 surtax on every purchase people made at McDonalds. Would they be able to sell as many Big Macs? Of course not, just like teenagers with no job experience can't get hired, since their labor isn't worth the minimum wage. What do you think such a surtax would do to the prices at *Burger King*? They'd go up, just like union wages go up because of labor laws. If McDonalds is forced to charge \$12 or so for a burger, you can bet that Burger King will raise its prices too. It's the same with union labor.

“So if you want to help poor workers, the best thing to do is take politics out of the system. Let everyone get a job who's willing to work. Yes, they'll start out with low wages. But those with initiative will quickly gain skills and earn promotions, or move to a better job. The way it is now, unskilled workers can't even get their foot in the door. Yes, if they could *get* a job, all of the government's mandated goodies would be nice. But your work benefits, mandated or not, are simply paid for out of your paycheck. Businesses don't hire you if you're going to lose them money. Here, as elsewhere, the politicians make wonderful speeches, but in the end implement policies that benefit their rich corporate contributors, to the detriment of disenfranchised workers.”

O'Toole looked at the congregation. As the only other white in the room, he was conscious of the reception to the professor's strong opinions. O'Toole was particularly worried that Mason was coming across as extremely naïve, or worse, extremely patronizing. But Mason was at least doing an excellent job in appearing *earnest*, O'Toole



noted with approval. Of course the introduction by the Reverend, explaining that Mason had been his “favorite teacher of all time,” had certainly been helpful. Even so, it was Mason himself who established his sincerity (if not accuracy), by constantly stressing that he shared the goals of the church members, and merely disagreed with the conventional solutions.

“And finally, we turn to our nation’s horrible War on Drugs, or War on *Some* Drugs as they say.” Mason paused as the room chuckled. “Now I’m sure many of you have heard what I am about to say in one form or another, but I think it bears repeating: Yes, illegal narcotics are potentially dangerous, and drug abuse is a tragedy. I respect any organization that educates the public about these issues, and I expect all good parents to teach their children to respect their bodies and their minds.

“However, it is immoral and simply impractical to order men with guns to eliminate drug use. The government sends heavily armed agents into your neighborhoods, with the authority to break down doors and shoot anyone who frightens them. These heavily armed agents will then kidnap at gunpoint any drug dealers they find, holding them prisoner in a small room for decades. After all this, of *course* the drug trade is violent. It is the government—the biggest gang in the world—which has introduced violence into the drug industry. For those of you familiar with American history, you know that gangsters shot each other over moonshine during Prohibition. But nowadays, when the production and sale of alcohol is perfectly legal, it would be absurd for the CEO of Budweiser to order a drive-by shooting of the board members of Heineken.

“I realize this seems cold-hearted.” Mason thought he had captured the interest of several men in the audience, but he could tell many of the women were horrified by his remarks. “But you must face reality. Yes, it would certainly solve many problems if we could snap our fingers and eliminate drug abuse. But we simply *can’t* do that. Even if we executed all convicted drug dealers, millions of Americans would still find a way to support their habit. Think about what we’re actually saying: Our present solution to inner city drug use is to give a bunch of young white guys guns.

“Oh, perhaps you’re worried about drug-related crimes? Well, if you don’t want people robbing old ladies to finance a cocaine habit, the absolute *worst* thing to do is

drive up the street price of cocaine by a factor of fifty. Yet this is exactly what our drug policy *aims* to do, to make drugs incredibly expensive.”

Mason glanced at his watch. He had to wrap up his talk.

“In conclusion, I would like to thank you, and Pastor Jones, for this opportunity. As a group who has suffered injustices both historical and current, the African American community does not need to be told the evil and hypocrisy of which our very own government is capable. There is nothing magical about democracy if many of the voters are ignorant and bigoted. What I have tried to sketch for you today is the argument that the same cruelty, dishonesty, and injustice that your community has experienced in the form of police brutality are characteristic of *all* government actions. You realize that ‘the system’ doesn’t work when it comes to foreign policy or law enforcement. So why do you think it’s any better at curing poverty or educating children?

“The challenges your community faces will only be solved when the racist government removes the remaining shackles from your people, and allows individuals to improve their own lives and others’ through peaceful means. Thank you and have a wonderful night.”

Mason squinted his face into a cheerful smile and left the podium. As per his arrangement with Jones, he wasn’t going to field questions from the audience. His purpose had been to plant a framework in the minds of the young teenagers who were only half-listening. The older he got, the more Mason believed that longer investment periods were just as productive in the field of ideas as they were in the production of commodities. A thirty minute talk today would have virtually no effect on the adults who heard it, and had to return to their daily routine of work and caring for children. But if Mason had planted a firm seed in just *one* child’s mind, the eventual payoff would make his speech well worth the effort.

\* \* \*

“Well, how did I do?” Mason asked as he and O’Toole walked to the car, parked across the street from the V.F.W. building. They had taken Mason’s old Toyota, since O’Toole had been uncertain of the neighborhood.

“I think you did as well as could be expected,” O’Toole said. “I was glad you didn’t use the A-word. I would’ve bolted for the door.”

“Come now, Mr. O’Toole, you need to learn to relish a good confrontation.”

“Nope, controversy is your department.” O’Toole unlocked the passenger door and then walked around to the driver’s side. “What *I* have to do is *sell*.”

“And how are your preparations coming?” Mason asked once they had buckled their seatbelts.

“Pretty well, I think.” O’Toole started the car. “I’m still a bit shaky on the children issue.”

“That should be an easy one,” Mason said with excitement, “since the government harms children more than any other group. Just point to the public school system, and the horrible foster care system. I have dozens of newspaper clippings in my office if you’d like some anecdotes.”

“Nah, I’m thinking more about...” O’Toole’s voice trailed off as he switched lanes on the busy road. “...is it in some sense *wrong* to abuse children in an anarchist society?”

“Of course it’s wrong,” Mason replied immediately. “Surely you don’t need a group of legislators to teach you morality.”

O’Toole laughed. “Okay, that’s not what I meant. I’m asking, how exactly do you penalize people for child abuse?”

“First, keep in mind that there doesn’t need to be ‘an’ answer to that. There are all sorts of mechanisms available to a free people to influence their world. Most obvious, parents wouldn’t send their children to schools or daycare facilities unless they possessed a solid reputation. Just as with abortion, people with particularly strong beliefs could form homogeneous communities in which all members signed a contract specifying the penalties for improper behavior. And the most elegant solution,” Mason said with a twinkle, “is the baby market. With no paternalistic regulation, adoptive couples would be allowed to offer thousands of dollars to mothers to give up their babies. This would probably eliminate child abuse altogether, since abusive parents would most likely sell their unwanted children to loving buyers.”

O'Toole smiled. "You know what? That will be our little secret. If anyone asks about children, I'll handle it."

"Fine with me," Mason said as he stared out the window.

## Six

“Yummy ass,” Tara whispered after leaning over.

“Hush!” Amy whispered back, jabbing Tara with her elbow and giggling. The plump woman was always exhilarated to be doing anything outside the office with Tara, but *still!* Sometimes Tara could be so immature. O’Toole, dressed in a fabulous Armani suit, turned back to face the audience.

“And so you see, if we guarantee them the tonnage figures I discussed earlier, they can profitably add us to a shipping route. And once we’ve got *that*, it means anyone else living on the island can ship items as cheaply as from anywhere else in the world.” O’Toole paused and then remembered to add, “You might have to wait longer, of course, for your product to get somewhere; but the point is, you’d pay the same to ship it.

“And so,” O’Toole continued, “if a business operation (1) only uses low-skill labor, (2) makes a product with a relatively high price per cubic foot, and (3) already serves an international market, then I’d bet you good money that this business could double its profits by relocating to our island.

“I have to tell you folks,” O’Toole said as he looked at the crowd, who put only a dent in the large auditorium, “I’m very excited about this. For those of you who’ve read Professor Mason’s book,” O’Toole said, raising a copy of *Minerva*, “you understand what we’re about to do. We are going to have the world’s first truly *free* economy. Our banking institutions will be completely private, offering security for their customers that will make Switzerland look like Russia. As you can read in the corporate charter, there is absolutely no power to establish an official currency or to regulate money in any way. And although no one would be forced to use it, I agree with Professor Mason that businessmen in today’s world of rampant inflation will once again adopt gold as the international money par excellence. Foreign investment will be *flooding* our shores.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” O’Toole said as he beamed at the crowd, “what I want you to picture is this: Suppose that an old wizard lived on a small island in the Pacific. Now when he grew very old, that wizard cast a spell, so that when the villagers buried his body in their native soil, the wizard’s magic would spread throughout the land. From that

moment on, anyone who grew crops, or made shoes, or went fishing, discovered something absolutely magical! You see, every night, when all the villagers went to sleep, the wizard's power would cause all of the day's harvest, or all of the cobbler's shoes, or all of the fishermen's catch, to *double in size*.

"Now as you can imagine," O'Toole said matter-of-factly, "word of this spread pretty quickly throughout the world. Foreigners came from all over to set up their own experiments. And sure enough, when the manufacturers of stereo equipment started producing speakers and tape decks, they found that every night the units made during that day would magically double. And the manufacturers lived happily ever after. The End."

The audience laughed. Even Tara had to chuckle.

"Now folks, what's the point of my little story? Simple: Professor Mason over there is the old wizard on his deathbed"—everyone laughed as Mason feigned outrage—"and a fair and stable business climate is going to be our magic. We already *have* the stereo manufacturers on board; they've already invested millions both in the Minerva Corporation and in their own manpower programs. They've really done the hard part: Dealing with the shippers, food vendors, construction companies, and so on. The Minerva Corporation is a *go*. It's going to happen, and these joint owners are *going* to be turning a profit in eighteen months, and they're *going* to earn millions within the first five years.

"So the only question remaining is this: Do *you* want to be a part of it? I personally am putting all of my own money into buying as much land from the Minerva Corporation as I can. The way I see it, Minerva's purchase from the Lotosian government is the exact same thing that happened when the Europeans bought Manhattan Island from the Indians for under thirty bucks.

"I know it seems too good to be true. But the prospectus is right here; you can see that what we're doing is perfectly legal"—as he said this, O'Toole wondered if bribing two Senate committee chairs were "perfectly legal"—"and legitimate. The reason I'm coming to you here, rather than holding an IPO, is simple: Only the truly *perceptive* can understand the significance of this. You are all here because I knew you'd at least understand the *potential* of what I'm showing you.

“Of course there are risks. That’s true of any investment opportunity. But for a mere thousand dollars, you can buy a parcel of land in what’s going to be the new Hong Kong. Now when the rest of the world catches on, and everybody realizes how lucrative this project is going to be, *everyone* is going to want to move their business to our island. And if, at that time, you were smart and bought some of this land, you can sit back and earn the generous rental payments for the use of your property, or you can choose to sell your parcel to the highest bidder. How much more than one thousand dollars do you think you’ll be able to get for it? How much did the price of Manhattan real estate go up?”

“In conclusion, ladies and gentlemen, I know I am personally not looking at this as a business venture, but as a way of insuring myself. You see, I like to fancy myself a savvy businessman. And I know that if I passed up this chance, and twenty-five years from now the little island off the coast of Lotos ends up as an economic powerhouse, I would just have to *kick* myself in the rear.”

*Can I do it?* Tara thought with a smile.

\* \* \*

“Thank you,” Tara said as O’Toole handed her a mug of coffee. Tara proceeded to fill it with six packets of sugar.

“I’m almost afraid to read your story,” O’Toole said with a smile. “After your review of Mason’s book, I’d hate to hear what you think of my vulgar commercialism.”

“You actually read my review?” Tara asked with surprise.

“Yes, I can read papers other than the *Wall Street Journal*,” O’Toole answered.

“Well, I wrote that a long time ago.” Tara recalled the joyous certainty she’d felt at that stage of her life.

“Oh, don’t get me wrong, I *loved* your review, and so did Mason.” O’Toole sipped from his own coffee.

“He did?” Tara snapped out of her daydream. “What did he say?”

“Oh, I don’t remember exactly,” O’Toole said, wishing to divert the conversation.

“‘Lovely girl’ or something like that.”

Tara's face drooped. "Oh, he was just being sarcastic then." Her face lit back up. "Anyway, don't you worry Mr. Peter O'Toole, I pledge that I will not make fun of your speech." She quickly added, "But I make no promises about your name."

"Oh I get it," O'Toole said with mock cynicism. "Let's blame someone for the name his parents chose. Believe it or not, you aren't the first person to notice that connection. I think this is the point where I say, 'Do you want some coffee with your sugar?'"

"Aww don't be a bad sport about it," Tara said. "C'mon, what was the best one you ever heard?"

"Hmm." O'Toole thought for a moment. "Well, it wasn't a movie reference, but someone once told me that my name was doubly phallic, and I thought that was pretty good. As it turns out, several years later, I heard that some comedian had said the same thing about the actor, so I'm sure this guy just stole the line."

Tara smiled, not at the anecdote, but at O'Toole's reference to "the actor," when most people would have said "the real Peter O'Toole" or "*the* Peter O'Toole."

"Well, I've got a friend waiting, so we should really get started." Tara looked over her notes. "Okay Mr. O'Toole, what in the world made you work on a new mousetrap?"

O'Toole smiled. The clichés were coming fast and furious today.

"My neighbor bought a trap for outdoor rodents that was basically a big box with a one-way door. You placed bait inside, the animal would walk in to get the food, the door would close behind it, and the animal was stuck inside.

"So I thought that was a great idea. But the box had clear walls, maybe so the rodent could see the bait; I don't know. So what I did was adapt the concept for an indoor mousetrap, using a much smaller box made out of cheap plastic. The plastic was opaque so that a housewife wouldn't have to look at the dead mouse inside. I put holes in the box so the mice could still smell the bait, and I put a handle on the top so the housewife could pick the whole thing up and throw it out without touching anything that a mouse might have.

"I offered it in various sizes." O'Toole always slipped into his sales swing when someone asked him about the Trap Door. "Those glue traps you can buy simply aren't



effective against big enough rats. And those are *precisely* the kind that you don't want to have sprawled on your kitchen floor with a broken neck from using a more traditional trap."

"Very interesting," Tara said, glancing at the notes she'd jotted on her pad. She looked up, "Do you always focus on housewives so much, Mr. Peter O'Toole?"

\* \* \*

"...and so what we're doing is a win-win situation. The Lotosian mainland gets a much needed injection of cash to maintain law and order during its tragic civil war, and we help entrepreneurs crank out products with lower prices for the consumer. We've hired legal experts to go over the deal. Under international law, the Minerva Corporation is technically buying the political sovereignty of the island from the government of Lotos. It just so happens that, as specified clearly in the corporate charter, the Minerva Corporation will choose *not* to exercise any of its internationally recognized powers. It will be as if someone ran for President, but signed a legally binding contract with everyone in the U.S. agreeing *not* to sign any bills once in office."

Tara nodded as she finished jotting her notes. She placed the pad on the table to her right, placed her elbows on her thighs while folding her hands, and rested her chin on her fingers.

"You've sold me," she said. "My father has a large stake in the paper. I can cut you a check immediately for, say, \$250,000?"

O'Toole was stunned but didn't show it. Throughout the interview, Tara's frequent smirks and grunts had made him certain that she found the proposal ridiculous. Before he could respond, Tara spoke.

"There's just one condition." Tara sat back in her chair, arching her back into perfect posture.

"Yes?" O'Toole asked.

"I'll only give you the check tomorrow morning..." Tara paused to allow O'Toole's mind to dare. "...in my hotel room."

O'Toole stood up. "Thank you for your generous offer, Miss McClare." He walked over to the door and opened it. "Were we in Nevada, perhaps things would be different. But as I have repeatedly emphasized, what we're doing here is raising funds for a completely legitimate business venture. I thank you again for taking time out of your schedule and I look forward to reading your story."

Tara grunted, grabbed her things, and headed for the open door, which led back to the auditorium. She stared at O'Toole with amusement as she walked out of the makeshift office, but said nothing more to him.

## Seven

“Hello David, come in.”

Mason entered the apartment, which was small even for Manhattan, and began pacing violently. O’Toole closed the door.

“Do you know a Mark Knolton?” Mason asked.

“No-o-o...” O’Toole responded, wondering where this was going.

“Mark Knolton is a former student who just happens to be on the construction crew at the main harbor.” Mason paused to compose himself. “Before he left, I asked him to keep a journal on the development of the island, as detailed as possible. I promised him it would one day be famous, in the same category as Anne Frank’s diary.” Mason chuckled but without amusement. “In retrospect, that was an excellent analogy.”

O’Toole folded his arms. He now had an idea of what this was about.

“This morning I received a letter from Mark.” Mason stopped pacing long enough to look at O’Toole. “It seems Minerva employees have an interesting way of dealing with the indigenous population.”

“You’ll have to fill me in,” O’Toole said after an awkward silence. “Mr. Knolton didn’t send me a carbon copy.”

“Well, it’s quite simple, really.” Mason resumed his pacing. “You may recall the provision in the original sale; you *should* recall it, since it was the one thing upon which I specifically insisted.”

O’Toole took a step back and leaned against the wall. This *was* going where he thought it would.

“In that provision,” Mason continued, “any Lotosian living on the island retained his property rights as dictated by custom. The Minerva Corporation was only buying the land owned by the *Lotosian government*; it was not to restrict the privileges of the native islanders whatsoever, unless they voluntarily agreed to sell their land over to Minerva.”

“Yes, I remember those details,” O’Toole said after another silence.

“Well, as I say, it seems the Minervan employees have a rather broad definition of the word *voluntary*,” Mason said with a sneer. “Apparently islanders are much more

likely to sell their property and move to the mainland, when masked men set fire to their huts in the middle of the night.”

*Damn*, O’Toole thought. He was hoping the college kid hadn’t known about the fires.

“Okay David, I want you to calm down.” O’Toole uncrossed his arms and motioned with his hands to indicate that Mason should relax. “I understand your concerns. But you have to understand, it wouldn’t have worked to do it your way.”

Mason’s eyes narrowed.

“David, listen to me. Don’t you think I would’ve done it your way if I could? We’re not talking about a few flower gardens in a corner of the island. We’re talking about villagers scattered all over. We’re talking about ‘customary’ rights to river access and to certain fishing locations. The government of Lotos nominally owned the entire island, and that’s what we bought. Under international law, six months ago the Lotosian president could have ordered everyone to relocate to the mainland. At least this way, they get paid to do it. For a lot of these people, we gave them over a year’s wages.”

Mason looked genuinely puzzled. “When we settled on the island, you told me it could be done.”

“I thought it could.” O’Toole looked at Mason for a long time before continuing. “The information I had was inaccurate. The report obviously was written from a Western viewpoint. I thought their property law was compatible with ours, and I thought we only had to convince a few elders to go along with us. But as it turns out, the tribal leaders either would not or could not order their people to move.

“David,” O’Toole pleaded. “You can’t build a factory on plots of land that aren’t contiguous. Did you really think we’d find somewhere inhabitable that no else had found before us?”

Mason said nothing and headed for the door. O’Toole opened it and closed it behind him as Mason left the apartment.

A heavy despair settled on Mason as he waited for the elevator. He should have known better than to trust someone else—even O’Toole—with something so important. Mason had waited his entire life for an opportunity like this, yet O’Toole couldn’t take

the time to check his facts. But it wasn't O'Toole's fault, really; he had no idea of the ramifications of his incompetence.

It didn't matter anymore. The fact was that now, regardless of the unprecedented freedom and prosperity made possible by Minerva, critics would forever have an unbeatable trump card: Minerva stole its land.

Safely behind the elevator doors, Mason began to weep.

\* \* \*

"Yep," O'Toole said as he nodded to the bartender. The argument with David had greatly upset him, and for the first time in almost a year O'Toole found himself drowning in Guinness.

Didn't David realize that O'Toole had been trying to *protect* him? Once the wheels were in motion, O'Toole couldn't have stopped Callahan from doing what he did. At that point, better to shield Mason from it entirely, so at least *his* conscience could be clear.

One couldn't really blame Callahan, O'Toole mused. Callahan was in this for the money, and he expected expropriation in five to seven years. So he certainly couldn't be expected to deal politely with the villagers.

*But why the fires?* O'Toole shook his head. *Maybe he's just bitter about his name.* O'Toole chuckled: Eugene Callahan *was* an unlikely name for a corporate baron.

O'Toole glanced down at the paper. He had been picking up *Verdicts* ever since Tara McClare's payment of the full \$250,000 had come in. Although not particularly interested in the topics of her articles, O'Toole could certainly appreciate McClare's style. Her articles exuded sex appeal as shamelessly as she did in person. And O'Toole was especially amused by the professional look, complete with glasses that were probably not even prescription, that McClare had adopted for her picture. O'Toole wondered if the paper would have even *had* the staff photos at the end of every issue, if not for Tara McClare's looks and her father's position.

“Ooh, we like her around here,” the bartender said as he placed the fresh beer in front of O’Toole. “Tara McClare comes in just about every week. She lives right down the street.”

“I know,” O’Toole answered.

“Oh, you’re one of *those* guys? A real fan, huh?” The bartender chuckled. The smartest thing the owner ever did was give Tara McClare and Guest a bottomless tab. When Tara got loaded and started dancing by the jukebox, nobody left the bar. The bartender chuckled again, recalling the night Jack had been too drunk to stand and so Tara had grabbed a beautiful woman at a nearby table to dance. Several men had lined up at the pay phone to call their friends at that point.

“I don’t know what you mean,” O’Toole said. “I’m supposed to meet her here tomorrow night. Today I was a bit thirsty after a business meeting, so I came here to check the place out.”

O’Toole wondered for a moment why he had offered that explanation to the bartender. He realized that he’d been preparing for an encounter with Tara, even though she was supposed to be out of town until the next morning.

“You talk as if it’s a *date*,” the bartender said with a smile. “If I had a dime for every time Tara McClare invited a guy here as a treat, and he thought he was getting more than just the free drinks... Heh.”

“So she comes here with a lot of men?” O’Toole asked, taking care to sound unconcerned with the answer.

“Oh, well, yes.” The bartender seemed uncomfortable. “But really, it’s not like that. I shouldn’t have said anything; Tara’s—Miss McClare is a wonderful girl. I was just saying that it was *funny* how fellas—and I don’t mean you, of course, I’m just making an observation—look so pleased with themselves, sitting at a table and drinking beers with Tara McClare, and then Jack—that’s Jack Quinn, Tara’s boyfriend—will walk in and pull up a chair.”

“Hmm, I don’t think she’s mentioned a boyfriend,” O’Toole said. The bartender smiled.

“She usually doesn’t.” The bartender added, “But that means she must like you.”

“Ah, how reassuring,” O’Toole said with a grin. After a slight pause he asked, “So what’s this Jack Quinn like?”

The bartender actually threw back his head and laughed.

“Mister, Jack Quinn is *the* toughest man you will ever lay eyes on.”

“Oh really?” O’Toole finally took a sip of his beer. “And why is that?”

“Well,” the bartender said, “I can tell you a story, but you really need to keep it under your hat.”

O’Toole nodded.

“The thing is, normally I wouldn’t say anything—and you’ll see why—but I’d hate for you to go into this without knowing what you’re up against.” The bartender lifted up his index finger to indicate that he would resume the story as soon as he dealt with a customer at the other end of the bar.

As he returned, O’Toole considered interrupting to make it clear that he was not “up against” anything at all; he was just answering an invitation from Tara McClare to meet for drinks. But the bartender seemed particularly anxious to tell his story, something he had apparently done many times before.

“As I was saying,” the bartender said quietly, “Jack and Tara used to live in Chicago. Jack was mostly staying out of trouble, but his one weakness is his temper. There were a few incidents, all minor, and before he knew it, Jack had a little problem with some local mafiosos.

“Now this one night, Jack and Tara were in a small restaurant eating dinner. In comes three guys: a made man and his two goons.”

O’Toole nodded his head to show his interest in the tale. The bartender was becoming excited. It was obviously his favorite story.

“Now this is important, you have to understand the seating.” The bartender paused to make sure O’Toole was listening. “Jack and Tara were at a small table, both sitting on the booth side. The boss’s nephew—sorry but I really can’t say his name—walked up and sat down at a chair directly opposite them. The two goons each pulled up a chair and sat on the left and right side of the table.”

Quinn and Tara had had their backs facing the wall. After they sat down, Caruzzi's men had placed their hands on the table, using their gloves to conceal the revolvers.

“Come on without, come on within,” Eddie Caruzzi said, “well well well, it's the mighty Quinn.”

“What do you want?” Quinn asked. Tara instinctively slid closer to Quinn.

“What does any man want, Jack? To sit and have a drink with a beautiful woman.” With this Caruzzi flashed a toothy smile at Tara and wiggled his eyebrows.

Quinn dropped his eyes just enough to examine the table. The two men were both right-handed. They had both laid their guns flat on the table, barrel pointing straight out, away from their stomachs. Each man gripped his revolver with his right hand, while laying his left forearm and hand on top. For his part, Caruzzi's hands were empty; he was using them while he talked.

“Can anyone here tell me,” Caruzzi asked as he flagged a waitress, “why there are so many Irish cops?”

“Because they're born pigs?” the man to Caruzzi's left answered.

“Because they're into bondage,” declared the other man.

“Excellent answers, all around,” Caruzzi congratulated his men. “But specifically, the reason there are so many Irish cops...”

Caruzzi slammed his hands down onto the table. People at nearby tables stole glances at the unfolding scene.

Caruzzi leaned forward and said in a steady voice, “The reason there are so many Irish cops, is that the Irish are **so fucking stupid**, that when they all came here on a boat **since they couldn't grow anything besides a fucking potato**, they found out that being a cop was the only job they could **get**.”

Quinn sat back and tilted his head down. He wanted to see if the table were bolted to the floor.

“Nope, nothing down here,” Caruzzi said, sticking his head under the table. “No guns taped to the underside, sorry.” Caruzzi once again leaned on the table. “And it's well known that Jack Quinn doesn't carry a piece.”



That much was true. In addition to the frequent hassles with the police, there was too much temptation to snap. Quinn had long ago decided that he would walk around without a gun because, frankly, a man should be able to walk around his hometown without a gun.

“Are you listening to me, you piece of shit?” Caruzzi hissed, as Quinn continued to show no appreciation of the gravity of the situation. “I know you’re a real badass, aren’t ya.” Caruzzi paused to regain his composure. He was a made man, now, and he had to control his sarcastic urges in situations like this. If nothing else, he had to let his *men* know that he was now a higher form of life.

Quinn suppressed a grin as he scanned the restaurant. He was quite sure Caruzzi and his men were alone, but with Tara present Quinn wanted to be careful.

“But though you may possess a certain street reputation, you shouldn’t forget who *runs* the streets, Mr. Quinn.” Caruzzi thought that was a nice touch. “Now how many times do I have to tell you? *Leave Chicago.*”

*So much TIME*, Quinn thought as he rested his right palm on Tara’s left hip, with his fingers bent back towards the wall.

“How long are you going to just sit there and *stare* at me, you ugly motherfucker?” Caruzzi demanded.

Quinn said nothing.

“Do you think I’m *bluffing*? You think mob shit is just in the *movies*?” Caruzzi turned to address Tara. “Hey twinkle tits, listen up: I know how much you must love the eggplants, going to clubs with Jim Knight like you do. Well it’s your lucky day: See, if your boyfriend doesn’t get the **fuck out of Chicago** by next week, I am going to *personally* arrange for you to have five healthy black cocks—”

“Julie!” Quinn suddenly yelled over Caruzzi’s left shoulder, a look of hilarity on his face. “Your nipple’s showing!”

Automatically, Caruzzi’s men glanced at the bar. Caruzzi turned his head left but suddenly felt very uneasy.

Quinn squeezed his hand tightly into Tara, and threw her off the bench. In the same motion he leaned forward, stuck out his index finger and jammed its tip into Caruzzi’s right eye. He then stared at the center of the table as he brought his hands

down. He simultaneously found both right wrists and with a quick jerk tilted them up. The two men, after spending years emulating fictional gangsters and knowing that the slow were the dead, did the obvious thing when each saw the other's revolver pointed at his chest: They pulled their triggers.

After the shots Quinn quickly let go of the wrists and punched a stunned Caruzzi in the chest, knocking him out of his chair and onto the floor. Quinn flipped the table out of the way and took a step forward as Caruzzi shuffled away on the floor.

*Oh, he'll show me where it is*, Quinn thought as Caruzzi's right hand traveled up his coat and slid inside. Quinn pounced, placing one knee on Caruzzi's chest while he threw open his coat. He found the gun, a small automatic. Quinn pulled his elbow back past his head, then brought the gun forward in a quick thrust, jabbing it into Caruzzi's mouth and smashing teeth in the process.

"Now Cyclops, you listen to *me*." Quinn leaned over with his face only a few inches from Caruzzi. He whispered. "You make sure you tell your uncle that *you* fucked with *me*. And then you tell him, that if anything should *ever* happen to Tara, I'm gonna hurt you *for real*."

Quinn's fury was broken by a light hand on his shoulder.

"Johnny, we need to *go*," Tara commanded.

As they ran out the door, Quinn glanced back at the floor. The man to the right of Caruzzi didn't look like he was going to make it. *Damn*.

## Eight

O'Toole poured Tara another glass of wine. He couldn't take his eyes off of her; in the dim candlelight she was absolutely stunning.

"But I just don't understand," O'Toole said, "how you could...*associate* with someone like that."

O'Toole was very interested in the exact nature of Tara and Quinn's relationship. He lately had been plagued by a string of "bad luck," and O'Toole couldn't help but be suspicious. It was not a matter of jealousy but simple prudence.

In the beginning it hadn't really mattered. O'Toole hadn't touched a woman since the crash, and he had doubted if he ever would again. The physical urges had naturally resumed, but he just didn't feel the whole thing was *worth it* anymore. So he thought the outings with Tara, though replete with innuendo, were harmless; he knew *he* wasn't going to pursue the matter. And he had assumed that someone like Tara McClare would stop inviting him once she'd filled in the details of her personality sketch, and moved on to somebody else new and interesting.

But after the fourth session of free drinks (and the second of jukebox dancing), things had changed. As she pulled up to his apartment on that night (because of Tara's taunting, O'Toole had had far too much to drive himself home), Tara had thrown her pink Mustang into Park and jumped in O'Toole's lap.

"Does this make you uncomfortable?" Tara asked. "I can move."

"N-no, it's fine," O'Toole said. He stared into her eyes.

"Can I ask you something?" Tara queried.

"Ask away," O'Toole said, and nervously drummed his fingers on the door.

"If we were shipwrecked on a desert island," Tara asked, "would you kiss me *then*?"

O'Toole was speechless. After a moment it occurred to him that this was in fact an invitation.

“Oh!” Tara exclaimed after a moment of necking. She looked down. “It seems we have a visitor.”

“Uh,” O’Toole fumbled, “yes, that’s my friend. It’s been a while since I’ve done this, so he’s a little eager.”

“Hmm...Maybe someday I’ll meet your friend,” Tara said and they resumed necking.

O’Toole put down his menu.

“They tell me the lobster bisque is ‘to die for,’” he said and smiled.

“That’s what they say about cigarettes,” Tara said without looking up from her menu.

“Okay!” she said after another moment. She put down the menu. “I know what I’m having.”

“Good,” O’Toole said, declining to ask Tara her selection. He didn’t want to encourage the idea that deciding on a meal was a big event. “Now you can finally answer my question.”

“What do you want me to say?” Tara asked. “He’s an intriguing man. He’s so...” Tara looked up in the air, a slight smile on her lips.

O’Toole braced himself for the worst: rugged, solid, sexy, masculine.

“...*honest*.” Tara looked back at O’Toole, with the same expression she’d had after choosing her entrée. “Yes, that’s what it is: John Quinn is very honest. Unlike *some* people, who will say anything to make a sale...” Tara pursed her lips and paused, pretending she did not see the implication for O’Toole. “But unlike *those* types of people, John Quinn is a *real person*, and that’s a very rare thing to find.”

“He’s also a *real criminal*,” O’Toole answered in the same tone.

“Whoa ho *ho!*” Tara said and laughed. “You violate international agreements to start a colony with a right-wing *anarchist*, and you’re telling me I shouldn’t associate with John Quinn?”

“I am not telling you what you should or shouldn’t do,” O’Toole said. “I’m just curious how a responsible woman can be attr—involved with someone like that.”

“He’s very spontaneous,” Tara said after a moment of silence. “He doesn’t worry about the future. He makes you feel as if nothing could be more enjoyable than the present moment. Not at all like *you*, who lays out his clothes for the week.”

“I don’t ‘lay my clothes out,’” O’Toole said and emptied his glass. “I just hang them up in the right order when I get home from the cleaners.”

“The words of a heroin addict—I take it all back!” Tara said and signaled the waitress by pointing at the empty bottle of wine.

“Don’t worry, you’re just as spontaneous as John Quinn,” Tara said, and leaned over to pat O’Toole’s knee. As she said it, she recalled the night in Paris.

Quinn had left the country immediately following the Caruzzi incident. At his urging, Tara had taken off from work and toured Europe with him.

“Any trouble at the airport?” Quinn asked once they were settled in the taxi. He had arranged for several friends to watch Tara, but providing protection for someone who didn’t even want it was quite difficult.

“Nope. And no rusted vans pulled up when I went jogging,” Tara said contemptuously.

“Good then,” Quinn said, tossing one of Tara’s gloves onto the floor by her feet. “Welcome to Paris.”

Quinn leaned over to pick up the glove. As he did, he pulled up Tara’s skirt just enough to expose her left knee. He kissed it gently.

“Driver?” Quinn said as he popped his head up. “How long until the hotel?”

“About fifteen minutes,” the driver replied.

“Make it thirty,” Quinn said, tossing a hundred dollar bill onto the front seat.

“So how does it work then?” O’Toole asked. “You run around with the bad boys, then you catch your breath with the nice guys?”

“I’m not sure,” Tara said with puzzlement in her brow. She folded her hands and rested her chin on them. “Which one are you?”

“I am *definitely* a nice guy,” O’Toole said.

“But that’s just what a bad boy would say. He’d break my heart, wouldn’t he?” Tara said, nodding her head.

O’Toole just smiled. He had quickly learned Tara had too much energy to be beaten in a battle of wits.

O’Toole’s attention wandered from Tara’s conversation as he tried to plan something spontaneous. He could easily persuade the staff to accommodate him; a simple story about his desire to propose, plus some tipping, would see to that. But what to arrange? A special song from the band? No no, a special *dance* on the floor, just he and Tara.

“Hi, good evening,” an employee said after approaching the table. “Sir, are you Peter O’Toole?”

“Yes,” O’Toole answered.

“Great!” The woman seemed genuinely pleased. “There’s someone on the phone for you; says it’s very urgent.”

O’Toole’s brow furrowed. He excused himself and followed the employee.

As soon as O’Toole had left the room, a shy man wearing a collared shirt and sweater approached the table.

“Miss McClare?” he asked, shifting his weight nervously on his feet. “My name is Jim Teasdale. I work with Pete O’Toole. I hate to disturb you—may I have a moment of your time?”

“Oh-okay,” Tara said, slightly confused.

Teasdale sat in O’Toole’s chair.

“Slow down,” O’Toole commanded. “You work for *who*?”

“*You know, what’s his name....I’m telling you, we’ve been robbed!*” The voice on the phone proceeded with the story once again.

“But why are you calling me? How could you possibly have this number?” O’Toole was perplexed. The security teams at Minerva didn’t know him at all. They should report to Linehan.

“*Okay you’re obviously not the person to handle this. I’ll call somebody else.*” The phone clicked.

O'Toole checked his watch and calculated the time difference. He pulled a business card out of his wallet and dialed the home phone of Darrell Linehan.

“And really, I *don't* want you to hate Pete,” Teasdale implored. “But since his wife's passing, I think he just *gave up* on a normal relationship. He didn't want to risk getting hurt again. And I'm sure, during those years, well, he must have gotten it on one of our Vegas trips.”

Tara said nothing.

“Ma'am, you've got to understand, he truly doesn't *know*. He won't get tested, since he doesn't *want* to know. But after Amy told me, and she swears she was only with him, I thought I had to say something.” Teasdale glanced at the back hallway.

“I really have to go,” he said, standing. “*Please* don't say anything. It would embarrass him tremendously.”

“I *had* to say something,” Teasdale repeated over his shoulder as he hurried away from the table.

Chris Nook chuckled as he jogged to his car. It had gone fairly well inside; the woman was too stunned to ask any details.

*Well, they don't call me the Cockblock Jock for nothing*, Nook thought, referring to Matt's poetic nickname. *I may not be good for much, but I can certainly fuck up a healthy relationship.*

“What took so long?” Tara asked when O'Toole sat back down.

“Oh, just a problem on the island. No big deal; sorry about the wait.”

O'Toole had spent ten minutes while Linehan confirmed that the call had been a hoax.

“Have you ever been to Las Vegas?” Tara asked.

“Sure,” O'Toole answered. He had taken Mary there on several occasions.

“Do you work with a Jim Teasdale?” Tara asked.

“Ye-e-s,” O'Toole said, perplexed. Between the phone calls and Tara's random questions, he was ready for a nap.

“Describe him.” Tara sat back and stared at O’Toole.

“Well, he’s about five-foot-ten, he’s got brown hair, he wears glasses...”

“Does he ever wear contact lenses?” Tara interrupted.

“Not that I’ve ever seen.”

“And you’re sure his hair is brown? It couldn’t be black and you just got it mixed up?”

“I think I know the difference between black and brown,” O’Toole said. “What’s this all about?”

“Nothing, no big deal,” Tara said, and poured another glass of wine. She refilled O’Toole’s glass, even though he had only had a few sips.

“I know!” Tara suddenly exclaimed. “Let’s take a field trip and get blood tests tomorrow!”

“Yes dear,” O’Toole said, shaking his head. *This one was certainly a handful.*

Tara smiled and wiggled in her chair.

She also resolved to pay John Quinn a visit.



## PART II

## Nine

“Good evening,” Tara said into the camera and flashed a brilliant smile. She was wearing a conservative suit and her hair was pulled tightly back into a bun. “On tonight’s edition of *The Other Hand*, we’re pleased to have with us Doctor David Mason, distinguished professor of economics at the University of Minerva. Tell us Professor, how is our brave new university doing?”

“Our enrollment is constantly growing,” Mason said, dodging the question. They had only recruited one hundred and thirty students, almost all of whom were the children of parents who had immigrated for ideological reasons. So far the tuition didn’t even cover expenses; Mason himself received no salary. But it was all worth it: Here he had a chance to mold an entire *generation* of radicals.

“Although Professor Mason needs no introduction for our local viewers,” Tara continued, seeing that Mason would not elaborate on the university, “our foreign listeners might not realize that you are considered a living legend here in Minerva. Professor Mason was in many respects the intellectual architect of the Minervan system, which is basically predicated on Mason’s simple yet catchy motto: ‘Freedom works.’ Now that I have you here, Dr. Mason, I want to know: How do you feel when people refer to you as our George Washington?”

Mason blushed. He derived great amusement from Tara’s phrase “*our* George Washington”; this was obviously part of the act, since Tara would never have talked like this in private.

“Inasmuch as I am neither a military leader,” Mason said softly, “nor have I extracted my salary from my fellow Minervans through the threat of force, I would not consider myself analogous to General Washington. Benjamin Franklin, perhaps.” Mason considered. “Now your husband, on the other hand, *he* is a General Washington.”

Tara just smiled. Her producer had discouraged any on-air references to Peter; he said it was unprofessional, but Tara thought the real reason was that half of her viewers were infatuated with her.

“Professor Mason,” Tara said, “over the past week we’ve had several guests comment on the cultural and political impact that the little island of Minerva has had. As we approach the fifth anniversary of our founding, what reflections can you make from an economic point of view?”

“I think the most obvious economic aspect of Minerva’s brief existence is the return to hard money.” Mason paused to pull out a handful of coins. “I cannot stress how significant it is that the people of Minerva walk around with actual gold coins in their pockets.

“And notes drawn on Minervan banks,” Mason pulled out a few bills from his wallet and held them up to the camera, “are increasingly being used in foreign countries plagued by hyperinflation. Rather than holding their assets in the depreciating native currencies, average people, especially in Latin American countries, are exporting their wealth to Minerva. It is particularly common for banks such as Granite Trust to convert the real assets into gold, then keep it on deposit in their vaults. For a small fee, Granite Trust then sends its Latin American customers fully-backed gold certificates, which circulate in their countries as money.”

“One of our guests earlier this week, Robert Renhard, commented on this very phenomenon.” Tara leaned slightly forward. “He claimed that Granite Trust’s tight monetary policies were putting Latin American governments in an impossible situation, as well as stifling economic growth right here in Minerva.”

“Well, no one ever said a journalist could do the job of an economist,” Mason said, referring to Renhard’s occupation. “The fundamental flaw in his analysis is his use of the term ‘monetary policies.’ This is a political notion, and has nothing to do with the terms of the *contracts* signed between Granite and its customers. If a Minervan decides not to grow tomatoes in his backyard, this is not a matter of ‘farm policy.’

“In any event, his empirical claims are preposterous.” Mason paused to let his accusation sink in. “Latin America has had financial troubles far longer than a mere five years. And as for the growth of the Minervan economy, why, it has been simply unprecedented. Although I have grave reservations about the construction of such indices, U.S. analysts have estimated that over the last three years—so this doesn’t

include the starting year when output was practically zero—the island’s real gross domestic product has grown at an annual rate of roughly 220 percent.”

“Oh come now, Doctor,” Tara said with amusement. “That figure doesn’t adjust for population, am I right?”

“That’s true,” Mason conceded, “but the population is increasing in the countries that currently use GDP as an indicator of economic health; I was merely being consistent. But you’re right: Since the population in Minerva has been roughly doubling every year, the per capita figure would be about half what I said. Still, unprecedented.”

“But there are those,” Tara said, pointing her finger for emphasis, “who say that this rate of growth is unsustainable. The initial population of 5,000 or so plant workers, has grown to a projected 50,000 by year’s end. What do you say to someone who thinks, frankly, that we’re going to run out of standing room? Where will we put our waste products, Professor Mason?”

Tara held up her hands in helplessness. “Just dump them in the ocean?”

“Ms. McClare,” Mason said after a moment’s thought, “if we extrapolate from current trends, we can conclude with a high degree of probability that I will remain seated here and eventually crap in my pants.”

Tara said nothing, but Mason waited for any viewers who might be laughing.

“But we know that in reality this won’t happen, because surely I will take steps to avoid this outcome, once it becomes an actual threat rather than a hypothetical one.” Mason paused. “The same is true for society at large, which is, after all, composed of individuals. When the need arises, someone in Minerva will take care of it. As our current dumps become full, or if the price of land renders their operation unprofitable before then, entrepreneurs will devise new ways to collect and remove refuse. Perhaps they’ll intensify recycling efforts, perhaps they’ll ship it to foreign dumps, perhaps they’ll put it on large barges and burn them at sea.”

“I’m sure the other members of this planet will be thrilled with that,” Tara said and smirked. “But isn’t the broader issue, Professor Mason, whether the economic growth can be maintained? Isn’t this euphoria an illusion? Apartment sky-rises are going up, huge financial buildings are underway... Won’t we run out of jobs?”

“Ms. McClare, you really ought to take my class sometime,” Mason said. “A moment ago you were horrified that we would run out of standing room. Now, in the same breath you complain that businesses are erecting tall buildings to house our immigrants in the most space-effective way possible.

“We are on a small island, yes,” Mason continued. “Its area is only slightly more than ten square miles. But even so, our population could grow to 600,000 and we would still have a lower density than the city of Macau, in Portugal.

“Can we use these people? Yes!” Mason smiled. “Human beings, with their wonderful brains, are the most important resource a city needs. You wouldn’t be worried if we imported 10,000 supercomputers, would you? Then it shouldn’t worry you when thousands of people from all over the globe leave everything behind and move here to start a new life. A life of freedom.

“Ms. McClare, we already have a booming trade in fishing and tourism. But it takes young boys to work the fisheries and empty lobster traps, and it takes young women to staff our hotels and smile at the drunken tourists. I look around me, and everyday I see hundreds of eager young boys and girls arriving on our docks, hungry for work. This is a great thing.”

“I’d like to go back to something you mentioned a moment ago,” Tara said. “You said that our immigrants are coming here for a ‘life of freedom.’ But what do you say to those who claim that Minervans enjoy no political liberty at all, since we have no legislature or elected representatives? Aren’t we really just the subjects of Eugene Callahan, president of the Minerva Corporation?”

Mason paused. This was a tricky point; Tara was no slouch. In fact this very issue had been the cause of a major intellectual rift between Mason and most of his old colleagues.

“What you have said is, I believe, a grossly misleading characterization.” Mason paused again. “There is a certain sense in which, under international law, the shareholders of Minerva could be construed as the legitimate government of the island and its inhabitants. However, in truth they have no special prerogatives in our society, except that which is due to extraordinary wealth. But any actions, at least domestically, they take must conform to our independent legal codes.”

“Perhaps you could elaborate for the benefit of our foreign viewers?” Tara asked.

“Certainly. It is true, when the island was initially settled, all incomers signed an agreement with the Minerva Corporation, which stipulated a standard legal code—based largely on English common law, but I won’t get into that here.” Mason paused. “Now, the special feature of the Minervan code, is that it functions merely as a *default*. That is, any two parties can opt out of its provisions, and create their own mutually binding legal obligations, so long as they specify this beforehand, contractually.

“What happened over the course of a few years—okay, I’ll finish up,” Mason said, acknowledging Tara’s raised eyebrow, “—is that more and more people, whether moving into an apartment complex, or signing a work contract with an independent business, would agree to resolve any legal disputes through binding arbitration. In other words, rather than entrusting the outcome of any future lawsuits to the judge provided by the Minerva Corporation, any individuals can agree beforehand on a third party arbitrator, known for his fairness in past rulings. I would estimate that over ninety percent of legal disputes are settled through independent arbitration, and not under the ‘jurisdiction’ of Minerva (and the only reason it’s that *low* is that almost ten percent of legal disputes involve the Corporation itself). So in that sense, no, we are not at all subject to Mr. Callahan’s whims. If employees of the Corporation did anything outside their acknowledged property claims on the island, everyone would instantly recognize it as theft. People would stop immigrating, and foreign capital would stop flowing into our banks. Eugene Callahan may be ruthless, but he’s not stupid; he will not kill the goose as it lays golden eggs.”

“A serendipitous metaphor,” Tara said, chewing on a pencil, “for it leads to our last issue—we’re just about out of time. What is your take on the situation brewing on the Lotosian mainland?”

“Yes, a most unfortunate development.” Mason shook his head. Lugar’s coup was now two months old; it seemed he would remain in power indefinitely. “General Lugar is a military dictator. He is in charge only because he has convinced his competitors that he will kill them if they challenge his rule. He is predictably blaming the hardships caused by their terrible war on his predecessor’s sale of the island. I fully

expect he will launch an invasion within two years. He will claim to be liberating enslaved Lotosians, but in truth his goal will be the vaults of Granite Trust.”

“And this doesn’t worry you?” Tara put the pencil down. “Should we all take our money out of Granite?”

“Come now Ms. McClare,” Mason said and grunted. “If it ever came down to that, I assure you, the shareholders of Granite would have moved the gold abroad. Believe it or not, they are more concerned about the fate of their gold than you are.”

“You said ‘if it ever came down to that,’” Tara repeated. “Does this mean you think Lugar will decide *not* to invade? Perhaps due to international pressure?”

Mason laughed.

“No, Ms. McClare, that’s not what I think at all. What I think,” Mason said, “is that Lugar will assemble a ragtag group of tired, hungry conscripts, will hand them some obsolete weapons, and will ship them over here to be slaughtered.”

Tara’s eyebrows shot up. This response surprised even her.

“By the time the invasion actually gets underway,” Mason continued, “we will easily *outnumber* whatever army Lugar sends. (Incidentally, this is why I’m so pleased with our rapid immigration.) And with the prospect of war looming over their heads, the Minervan population will heavily arm themselves.”

“But won’t there be terrible bloodshed?” Tara said in horror. “Are you saying our children might have to fight and die?”

“Ms. McClare,” Mason said with resignation. “Do you fret at night, worrying that ‘we’ might forget to produce enough electricity for the island? Do you call up the grocery store to remind them to buy milk for their customers?” Mason folded his hands in his lap. “If something needs to be done, someone will figure out a way to do it and turn a profit.”

“So what are you saying? We all have to hire bodyguards? Or *mercenaries*?”

“Of course not,” Mason answered, then added, “but you can if you want. However, in this specific instance, the free market has provided a far more elegant solution.”

“Briefly Professor,” Tara said, looking at the clock.

“Well, as you no doubt are well aware,” Mason said, referring to Tara’s portfolio, “the price of land on the island has exploded. However, foreign investors and potential immigrants are still hesitant to commit to Minerva, because of the Lotosian situation. But when the world sees how Minerva handles itself during an invasion, capital and workers will simply swarm here.”

“And?” Tara asked, not seeing the relevance.

“What that means is that owners of real estate will reap a huge profit from a successful war. So what Steven Peckard—a brilliant financier from Wall Street—did was the following: He bought thousands of call options on prime Minervan real estate. Basically, he’s currently buying the right to buy a certain piece of land at ten times its current price, five years from now.”

The point was important yet subtle; Mason knew most of the viewers would not really understand options. He had to spell out the implications of Peckard’s ingenious scheme.

“So now we have a situation in which a businessman stands to make billions in American dollars if he can take steps to push up the price of real estate at least a few points higher than the strike price printed on the options.

“Now I don’t know much about military affairs,” Mason admitted. “And it’s possible that Peckard himself doesn’t either. But you know what? I bet he finds out very quickly. You’d be surprised how far a few billion dollars can really go.”



## Ten

“I’m telling you guys,” Matt said, looking up from the casino’s brochure. “This place is fucking *crazy*. You want to play blackjack with a topless dealer? You got it. You want room service to bring you up a little coke before you hit the tables? No problem.”

“That’s nothing,” Quinn said, looking out the window at the sparkling ocean below. “Tara told me it’s perfectly legal to deal in body organs.”

Matt looked confused.

“You know,” Quinn said, “for kidney transplants and stuff like that.”

“No shit,” Matt said softly, shaking his head in wonder. “You mean you walk into the store and pick out a kidney?”

“Maybe you can get a bigger dick,” Jim said without looking up from his newspaper. Matt ignored the comment, and looked inquisitively at Quinn.

“Well I don’t know—no, it must be through the hospital,” Quinn answered. “I don’t think kidneys have a long shelf life.”

“Longer than his dick,” Jim mumbled.

“Ha ha, let’s all laugh it up,” Matt said to no one in particular. “I’m white, and I speak with proper diction, so that means I must have a small wee-wee.”

“That’s a good name you picked for it,” Jim said, turning the page.

“Anyway,” Matt said, putting the brochure back in the seat jacket, “this place looks amazing. Too bad it’ll be gone in a year.”

\* \* \*

The men buckled their seat belts as the plane began its descent. They looked with awe at the scene below. The lights of the financial sector were concentrated on the lower half of the tiny island. Matt was especially pleased to see the manmade airport off the eastern coast. The night sky was clear, and the huge, floating runways provided a

comforting beacon. He had never flown internationally before, and Matt had grown a bit uneasy seeing nothing but ocean out his window.

\* \* \*

“Well that wasn’t so bad,” Matt said as the plane taxied to the terminal. “Who’s ready for some serious debauchery?”

“We’re here to see Tara’s baby,” Quinn reminded him.

“Okay, you’re right,” Matt said with sarcasm. “First we bounce the kid on our lap, *then* we go find the hookers.”

“Sounds good to me,” Jim said, taking his suitcase down from the overhead compartment.

A few moments later, the men walked into the airport terminal carrying their luggage. As Tara had warned, they immediately encountered a formidable security checkpoint. Passengers from other planes were already in line at the numerous metal detectors.

“What de fuck is dis?” Jim said softly, looking at the dozens of uniformed security officers.

They were all *women*.

\* \* \*

“But I still don’t understand why they don’t just hire men,” Quinn said, reaching for more potato salad. “Wouldn’t that be easier?”

“Yes, it would be cheaper,” Mason answered, “but then no one would buy the product. What you have to remember, Mr. Quinn, is that the people of Minerva are a very suspicious bunch. If a certain security agency gained market share, serving more and more clients, people would get anxious. The financial district alone requires hundreds of full-time, professional security employees. Now if they were all armed men, nobody would trust one company with that much power.”

Mason paused to take a bite of his burger.

“And that’s why Reliant’s move was so brilliant,” Mason continued after swallowing. “They were the first to have unarmed personnel. Once that caught on, they upped the ante by phasing in a completely female roster.

“You see,” Mason said with a grin, “the average Minervan is fearful of concentrated power, and this attitude hindered the security industry early on. But no one can object to the thousands of Reliant employees that now cover the island. Who wants to admit he’s afraid of unarmed women?”

“Wait a minute,” Quinn said. He had the feeling this Mason was spinning a yarn at his expense. “Let’s say, just for example,” Quinn flashed a look at O’Toole, “that Jim and I rob a jewelry store. What happens to us?”

“Probably what would happen is that the silent alarm would be triggered, and Reliant personnel would start arriving within two minutes.” Mason took another bite of his burger.

“And they don’t have any guns?” Jim asked.

“No, they don’t have any guns,” Mason responded.

“So...” Quinn began, still waiting for Mason to admit his ruse, “...what happens when Jim and I pull out our Uzis and start wasting rent-a-cops?”

“The initial response team would quickly run away,” Mason said, without the faintest hint of irony. “They would notify their headquarters, and armored units would be dispatched. The subways and piers would be notified and given your descriptions. And obviously,” Mason said with a smile, “the sizable bond the O’Tooles put up for your gentlemen’s trip would be forfeit.”

“So don’t hold up any jewelry shops!” Tara said. Her bond had ensured that, unlike most visitors to the island, Quinn and the others could move about freely without applying for an insurance policy at the airport.

“But still,” Quinn persisted. “Why can’t I just live off robbing people? You say I couldn’t get hired, okay. But I don’t need a job if I take whatever I need at gunpoint.”

“Well, just because the professional security personnel are unarmed doesn’t mean every *store owner* is,” Mason clarified. “But even so: What do you do with your impressive automatic weapon when the power and water are turned off in your

apartment? The utility companies have doors with locks, and I don't think they'll let you in to discuss the matter."

Quinn remained silent, but he was obviously unsatisfied.

"Look, Mr. Quinn," Mason said, becoming frustrated. "Are you and your friend going to remain together at all times? What happens when you need to use the bathroom? What happens when you sleep? If you really tried what you're suggesting, Reliant would have *dozens* of agents—in full body armor—following you around, warning everyone in your path. I'm sure you didn't notice it, but one of the clauses in the contract you signed at the airport gave your permission to be taken into custody in these situations. It very rarely happens, but occasionally Reliant teams corner suspects and bring them in with nets."

Mason paused and smiled. There had actually been a brief upswing in petty crimes when lonely shoplifters realized this would lead to tackling by groups of women. Reliant had quickly changed its procedures to deter this type of behavior.

"And that works?" Matt asked.

"Minerva has the lowest crime rate in the world, at least for cities with over one thousand people," Mason said with pride. "Criminals are rational; they know it's relatively easy to commit a crime on this island, but almost impossible to get away with it."

"Reliant officers always get their man," Tara said, repeating the obnoxious slogan, which was usually plastered on advertisements featuring particularly photogenic women in Reliant uniforms, often holding handcuffs.

Tara's head suddenly snapped up.

"Oh, I think Danny's awake!" she said eagerly and left the table to run inside.

\* \* \*

"Ohh, how's my little guy?" O'Toole asked, bouncing Danny on his knee. "Can you say hello to the nice Americans?"

Tara looked at Peter holding Danny and smiled. When Peter had first suggested moving to Minerva, in order that their son would be born on the island, she had been very

skeptical. Beyond the difficulty of arranging for proper prenatal care, the thought of leaving New York to live on an island in the middle of nowhere seemed terribly boring.

But her perspective had changed the day Danny was born. Suddenly Tara had not felt the absolute need to see the latest musicals or attend the most exclusive cocktail parties.

“And here he is, Mom,” the nurse said, handing tiny Daniel O’Toole to Tara. “A healthy baby boy.”

Tara hugged her son and then held him up to look in his face.

*Happiness.*

Mason tried to calm Danny when he began to cry. Tara walked over and took him back.

“Aww, it sounds like someone needs to be fed,” she said, leaving the patio and heading back inside.

“How do I get on *that* list?” Matt asked. He glanced at O’Toole, who did not seem to mind Matt hitting on his wife.

## Eleven

“Gentlemen, this is Ryan Miller from the CIA; he’s also the leading expert on Minerva law at RAND.” General Riggs stepped back as Miller walked to the front of the room, located in the bowels of the Pentagon. “Ryan, I think you know everyone here. That’s Bill Norton from the NSA, filling in for Mark.”

“Good morning,” Miller said softly, looking at the men seated around the table. At RAND he had certainly lectured in front of more *distinguished* groups, but in terms of sheer power, this briefing was a first for him.

“As many of you already know,” Miller said as he clicked to his first slide, an aerial photograph of troops drilling, “the situation in Lotos is heating up. We estimate that General Lugar is massing up to 15,000 troops to reclaim the neighboring island, ‘Minerva,’ which is how the residents refer to it.”

Miller clicked to the next slide, showing six tanks lined up in single file.

“The country of Lotos is very poor. Lugar really only has about two dozen working tanks, a knock-off Soviet design. We know he’s loaded up ships with extensive artillery; he’s definitely planning for a siege.”

“Mr. Miller,” Sandy Krupman from the Joint Chiefs said. “What exactly is our concern? Nationalization?” Krupman knew that several American firms were heavily invested in the tiny manufacturing island.

“No,” Miller said immediately, forgetting his audience. “What we have on our hands is not concern, but an opportunity.” Miller was pleased to see Krupman’s eyebrow shoot up.

“The conventional understanding,” Miller explained, “is that the Minervan population has no government and therefore no army, and in a sense, this is true. However, for the past six months a wealthy American businessman, Steven Peckard, has been quietly recruiting hundreds of sharpshooters from around the globe.”

Miller clicked to the next slide, of a magazine featuring various items of body armor: flak jackets, helmets, bulletproof boots.

“The odd thing to remember about the island of Minerva is that its police force consists almost entirely of unarmed women,” Miller said with a chuckle. This had been by far his most interesting assignment. “Naturally, there’s a booming market in protective combat equipment. Our operatives in these plants inform us that orders have more than tripled over the last four months.

“We also know—actually, a college professor from the island announced it on television—that Peckard has engineered some sort of real estate deal, so that he stands to make billions of dollars if Lugar’s invasion can be repelled.” Miller paused. “I think Peckard is quietly building an army of snipers, and I think we could have a very bloody war on our hands very soon.”

“But what else have they got?” Riggs asked. “Has this Peckard imported tanks?”

“Not so far as we know,” Miller answered. “In any event, tanks would be relatively useless on Minerva. The buildings are packed together; only the main highway is even wide enough for a tank.

“It *is* possible...” Miller said as he clicked on another slide, this one taken from a helicopter, and showing the skyline view of the Minervan downtown. The sky was filled with helicopters. “...that Peckard has converted any number of the commercial helicopter fleet into assault vehicles.”

“But how many more men does Lugar have at home?” Riggs persisted. He was realizing that the meeting was a waste of time.

“Well, that’s the thing. I’d say Lugar could spare up to another 10,000 without jeopardizing his position. He’s not exactly popular among his people.”

“And you’re worried about the human rights situation,” Riggs asked, “when, what is it?, 25,000 battle-hardened soldiers have to knock out some snipers and upgraded news choppers?”

“Again,” Miller said, becoming frustrated with the general’s impatience, “we don’t have any worries; this is an opportunity. But to answer your question: No, it’s not the Minervans who are going to be knocked out.”

The men all leaned forward slightly.

“Although the police are unarmed, that’s not true of the average residents.”

*Ahh*, Riggs thought. He had just assumed that if the police were unarmed, then the civilians had to be as well. Yes, if a few thousand of the populace had Stinger missiles and such, there could be a very protracted struggle indeed.

“Remind us Mr. Miller of the smaller island’s population?” Riggs inquired.

“A conservative estimate is 100,000,” Miller replied. He quickly added, “But you need to remember, roughly ninety-five percent of that figure are men, mostly young and working class.

“Even among the women,” Miller continued, “half of them are police officers. And the other half are in the sex industry,” Miller added with another chuckle.

Riggs shook his head sadly. These people were repugnant. He would never forgive the fools in the first Administration for approving the settlement. No matter how much Callahan had put up, Riggs knew it would not be worth it in the long run.

“You have repeatedly mentioned an ‘opportunity’?” Krupman reminded Miller.

“Yes!” Miller said. “My colleagues and I are not in agreement on this point, but I believe any invading troops will be wiped out. General Lugar surely doesn’t fully grasp the situation, and I expect he will bleed his forces dry.

“This will leave him incredibly vulnerable at home. I propose that we immediately draw up plans for an occupation force, in order to keep the peace on the Lotosian mainland. Ideally we would have it ready for deployment the moment Lugar realizes he’s in trouble, while world opinion will presumably sympathize with the routed Lotosian forces and their horrendous casualties.”

Krupman’s eyebrow shot up again. He remained unconvinced by Miller’s analysis, but the lad had certainly come up with an excellent suggestion.



## Twelve

“Oh Danny,” Tara sighed, looking at her son. He had carefully covered the entire surface of his tray with a product from Gerber. Tara walked over and took the spoon from the bowl.

Sensing the danger, Daniel O’Toole snapped his head violently to his right.

“Now *stop it* Danny,” Tara said. She grabbed his cheeks with her left hand and turned his face back towards her. “Eat your carrots.”

Daniel was appalled at the (attempted) force feeding. He successfully managed to expel most of what his mother had so rudely put into his mouth.

“Ahhhh!” Tara said and looked up at the ceiling. She put the spoon down on the tray and stood up. “Fine Danny, be a bad little boy if you want. I’m not going to fight you.”

Tara walked toward the counter and used the remote control to turn on the television. Daniel stared at her, his fury growing. She had just served him the absolutely most *disgusting* thing he had ever tasted, and had literally shoved it into his mouth, and now *she* was criticizing *him*?

“*Baad!*” Danny wailed, hurling the bowl at Tara’s head. The bowl bounced on the floor, short of its target.

“What’s all the commotion?” O’Toole said, coming into the room.

“Your son is being quite ornery,” Tara informed her husband. She ripped off some paper towels to begin cleaning the kitchen floor.

O’Toole walked over to Danny, who immediately smiled.

“Were...*you* bein a bad boy?” O’Toole asked, touching Danny’s nose on the word “you.” He repeated the question and the touching of Danny’s nose twice.

Daniel emitted sounds of gratitude. He had seen his father act in this manner on previous occasions, and Daniel could not remember a single instance in which the outcome was not favorable to his interests.

Truth be told, Daniel was almost somewhat relieved. He had never thrown an object before, and he certainly had never thrown one at his mother. As he let it go, his crying had actually stopped; Daniel had been waiting to see what she would do.

O'Toole walked over to the sink to wet a rag. He walked back over to Danny and began cleaning his face.

Tara turned up the television.

"I'm sure everyone was relieved," the anchorman said, "when Reliant and the Mariners Association agreed today to talk things out."

The picture shifted to the Mariners' hall. The building was surrounded by hundreds of Reliant officers, most seated at picnic tables. Press bulbs flashed as the door opened and out walked the leadership of the Mariners.

"After a tense three day standoff," said the dubbed-over reporter, "Tom Brady, head of the Mariners Association, has agreed to arbitration in his dispute with Prudence Incorporated. The insurance giant had insisted that the Association, itself a client of Prudence, grant third-party inspection of its premises. After two days of failed negotiation, Prudence decided to call on the women of Reliant to lend a helping hand."

The picture shifted to show Reliant officers arriving on the scene.

Nets had been moved near the building by its exits, while the sidewalk and alleys around the building were covered in picnic tables. Crews of independent contractors had begun to set up portable toilets and a chain link fence around the building's perimeter.

Mary Winters looked warily at the top windows of the Mariners' hall with her binoculars. It had been decided that taking the rooftop would be too provocative. If, as was feared, Brady and others tried to escape in a helicopter, the Reliant officers would do nothing except track it in their own vehicles.

Winters thought the entire situation was ridiculous. Inasmuch as Reliant *was* the law, why not simply drape the building with fencing? This would be just as provocative as what they were doing now. The fact that Reliant's standard landlord agreements allowed for their present actions, while not for impeding air access, was a legal technicality. And legal technicalities were not worth losing good women over.

“How many now?” Johnson asked, his hand running absentmindedly over the grenade launcher.

“I’d say another fifty just showed up,” Brady responded.

“The longer we wait, the harder it will be,” Johnson warned Brady and the other Mariners. “We should have kicked them off the moment they started setting up shop.”

“They’re waiting with nets,” Brady said in a scolding tone. “If we had gone out there, we would’ve had to shoot them.” Brady looked out the window at the hundreds of women. *Better to lose than to start a country that way.*

“No, we’re not going to shoot unarmed mothers and daughters.”

Brady put the binoculars to his eyes and examined the officers closest to the building. They were quite tall, and though it was hard to tell through the armor, they looked solid. Most were wearing helmets with the visor flipped up. A wide assortment of nets, poles, and bolas littered the ground. A few of the officers leaned on giant foam spray guns.

*I’m not even sure we would make it,* Brady thought and chuckled.

“Commenting on tonight’s peaceful resolution,” the reporter said, “is Conrad Weimar, law professor at U of M.” The screen shifted to a sharply dressed man seated in an office.

“What this episode has shown us,” Weimar said eagerly, “is that the system works. Even though the brave men of the Mariners were only trying to help, we see that no one is above the law. If the arbitrators rule as expected, then the Mariners will need to either give up their fancy weapons...or pay their insurance premiums like every other militia.”

“Some local residents, however,” the reporter said, “were not so optimistic.” The screen shifted to an obviously blue collar man.

“This is nuts,” he said into the camera. “We’ve got a sadistic tyrant about to invade us, and rather than getting armed and ready, Reliant’s picking on the *Mariners*? Absolutely f\*\*\*ing nuts.”

The scene shifted back to the anchorman.

“Today was not all good news for Prudence, however.” A graphic appeared to the right of the anchorman, depicting a certain area of uptown Minerva. “Four people are dead and a fifth is in critical condition after a crazed gunman opened fire in the Washburn district.”

The screen shifted to a hectic scene of emergency crews and crying onlookers.

“The man, identified as Prudence client Jim Borone, is still on the loose, and is considered armed and extremely dangerous. In a press conference ending just moments ago, a spokesman for Prudence expressed the company’s sincere regret and vowed to capture Borone within twenty-four hours. In light of the horrific crime, the spokesman also said Prudence would go beyond the legal penalties and would pay all funeral expenses for the grieving families.

“Some people, however,” the anchor said, raising his voice, “feel that’s not enough.” The screen shifted to a man in a blue suit. A graphic appeared at the bottom of the screen reading, “David Kraft, Carecoe CEO.”

“Although we’re very pleased to see Prudence admit its blame in this incident—unlike its previous foot-dragging in the Highland murders—they’re still not addressing the fundamental deficiencies in their psychological profiling. A Jim Borone never would’ve been approved for a Carecoe policy.”

“Prudence shares were down eight points by the market close,” the anchor informed. He turned to face a different camera, and the screen shifted to accommodate.

“And finally, an invasion from the Lotosian mainland could be just one month away.” The screen showed soldiers in field exercises. “This from an expert on the Lotosian civil war, who says that recent satellite photos paint an alarming picture. Militia officials continue to urge caution, asking residents to leave any possible fighting...up to them.”

“Adieu, adieu, to you and you and you-u,” Tara hummed as she turned off the television. At her urging, Peter had purchased guaranteed airliner seats that could be used at a moment’s notice. Even if, as Peter and the Professor believed, there was no danger from the impending invasion, Tara wanted her family to find that out from a sofa in California.

## Thirteen

“So you want us to do *nothing*?” Paul Kennedy, head of the Railworkers, asked. Several other men at the table, all dressed in blue jeans, grunted with approval.

“Of course not,” Peckard said and smiled. “It’s simply that I want all of you to *conserve* your forces. I’ve spent millions recruiting and training foreign specialists. Let *them* die for our streets. If my approach should fail, I want your men to be the last line of defense for our women and children.”

“If we hit them as soon as they land,” said George Ribald, commander of the Hampden Militia, “we can protect downtown from their artillery. But if we just hole up in the city, letting them build up...”

“I assure you, there will be no shelling of the city. I’ve acquired several helicopters for that purpose.”

Peckard took out the Holy Bible. He thought the move would be quite dramatic, especially in the windowless conference room.

“Gentlemen, we need to look at the big picture. If, as Mr. Brady has suggested, we mine the coastline and arm a merchant fleet, then yes, we could prevent the Lotosians from even landing. What the world would conclude,” Peckard continued, “from such a success is this: ‘When you invade Minerva, be sure to have a superior naval force.’”

“But what we really *want* the world to conclude is this: ‘Do *not*, under any circumstances, invade Minerva. Your troops will not stand a chance.’” Peckard opened the Bible to somewhere in the Old Testament. “Gentlemen, the way to convince the world that we are invincible, is to do it with a ridiculously small number of men. In Judges chapter seven, we see that the Lord God commanded Gideon to send away his excess troops, in order that his victory over the Midianites would be a greater tribute to God’s glory. In the end, Gideon used a mere three hundred men to conquer an enormous army.

“*That* is what we need to do.” Peckard closed the Bible. “Now I’m not the Lord, so I brought in closer to six hundred men.” A few of the men chuckled. “We need to show the world that Minervans are *not* to be pushed around. Our tiny island has a

reputation of cowardice; standup comedians the world over crack jokes about Reliant's female officers. It's time to disabuse the world of its illusions. It is time to show everyone what a few hundred *men* in Minerva can do."

Peckard paused. He thought the testosterone approach would go over well with the union types.

"And what exactly *will* these six hundred men do?" Kennedy was growing impatient with Peckard's evasiveness.

"Gentlemen," Peckard said with a smile, "what I've done is really quite clever. I've constructed a perimeter of grates around the downtown area. The Lotosians will think they're regular sewer grates. But as they walk on or near them, the Lotosian soldiers will be coated with a special gas." Peckard had decided not to tell the men that the gas was slightly radioactive, since they might misunderstand. "I've installed an entire network of surveillance devices that can detect the gas. Using data from the sensors, as well as infrared and conventional cameras, will allow my command center to track all of the enemy combatants.

"We've been training for a solid four months now." Peckard smiled; he was truly pleased with himself. "The teams have been chosen, and the men know the system. Targets are assigned to them through their helmets, and they take a concealed route to the appropriate sniper's nest. Over the last year I've placed hundreds of them around the city.

"I've also fortified all of the major buildings," Peckard continued. He could see the men were very interested in what he had to say. "I can have five expert snipers covering any open area you tell me in the entire downtown within three minutes. We will have total visual supremacy; we can see all of their movements, while they can see none of ours. We will rule the streets, even at night."

"You can't guarantee that," Kennedy objected. "If your plan backfires, or if your foreign mercenaries decide to switch sides..."

"Oh, but therein lies the beauty of it," Peckard said. He had hoped someone would challenge him. "Look at the deal I have arranged with these expert marksmen: I provide them with the most sophisticated body armor in the world, and comfortable havens from which to shoot. I pay them a fixed rate per kill, and fine them heavily for

any collateral damage. We've been running it through the simulators, and my final crews are all quite lethal, while retaining the precision necessary to avoid civilian deaths. I promise you: Against my teams, the Lotosians will not stand a chance."

"Is all this legal?" Brady asked. He was certainly convinced of the potential in Peckard's approach—a bit *too* convinced.

"An excellent question, Mr. Brady, and one that strikes close to home." As Peckard had hoped, the men laughed. Brady had been the brunt of ridicule since his surrender to a woman. "Yes, every training session is monitored by my insurers. And my attorneys bought written permission for the modifications to the city. I harbor no chemical or other exotic weapons. My men will pose no threat to the Minervan people; if we get out of line and you want to shut down our operation, just turn off the power and stop sending food up the elevators."

Peckard looked the men over. They seemed intrigued but still unconvinced. Peckard pulled out a stack of papers and began distributing packets to each of the men.

"Gentlemen, as a token of my appreciation for your cooperation with my bold plan, here are the rights to purchase, at a set price, excellent parcels of real estate in your respective neighborhoods." Peckard waited as the blue-collar types examined the call options.

"Now it is in *all* of our interests, financially, to minimize the property damage in any conflict. I know many of you have invested in, shall we say, persuasive weaponry. But before you use it—and depreciate your investments—at least give my teams a *chance*. And if my men rout the Lotosians all by themselves...well, then you suffer zero casualties, and with those rights before you, you'll all have an extra ten million or so for the association coffers."

Peckard could almost see the mental scales tip with his bribe. *This place is wide open*, he thought and grinned. Before coming to the wretched island, he had never enjoyed such freedom to grease deals with side payments. Peckard knew that, soon enough, his maneuvers would pay off, quite handsomely indeed. Now he just had to convince the yahoos to use their influence to keep civilians from "helping" once the fighting started.

## Fourteen

O'Toole turned down the radio at the commercial break. Most of the NPR analysts had simply assumed the fledgling island would be retaken by the Lotosian forces, and had proceeded to reflect on the social and cultural lessons of the episode.

O'Toole glanced in the rearview mirror. Danny was in his carseat, and Tara had insisted on sitting in the back of the rental car next to him. She was lightly tickling his stomach and whispering in his ear. Tara caught O'Toole's eye in the mirror, just long enough to stick out her tongue and retract it again.

As Tara returned her attention to Danny, O'Toole's mind returned to the coming encounter with her father. O'Toole had never met Larry McClare. Tara had wanted to elope, and that had been fine with O'Toole. The couple had moved to Minerva for Danny's birth, and McClare did not intend to visit the "desolate" island, even to see his first grandchild. When Tara wanted to spend time in the States, O'Toole had suggested working in a visit to her father's vacation home in sunny southern California.

Tara ran her fingers over Danny's shirt. She was still completely enthralled with just *touching* his tiny body: his tiny tummy, his tiny fingers, his tiny toes. Tara leaned over once again to smell Danny's head and gently kiss it.

Daniel looked out the window at the passing trees, which were a very strange sight to someone born on Minerva. His mother's warm breath and gentle cooing were very relaxing. *I'm happy.*

\* \* \*

"Are you a Scotch man?" McClare asked. The desired answer was clear.

"I am if it's Johnnie Walker," O'Toole responded, after first verifying that that was indeed the brand.

"So tell me Peter," McClare asked after they had both sipped their drinks. "Now that you've had a few years to get readjusted, what sort of work are you doing on this island? You haven't become a fisherman, have you?"



“No sir,” answered O’Toole. “I’m still on salary from the Minerva Corporation. I give talks here and there, explaining the company’s policies.”

“So you’re Callahan’s press secretary,” McClare summarized.

“That’s one way to put it,” O’Toole said and smiled. “I’ve also formed a hedge fund with David Mason, the brains behind Minerva. I’m sure you know of him.”

“Yes,” McClare said. “He’s the professor who fooled not only his teenage students, but also middle-age investors. An impressive fellow indeed.”

“On the island we tend to think so,” O’Toole said. He took another sip of his drink. “Anyway, he’s accumulated some inventive strategies over the years, but couldn’t try them in a regulated stock market. Naturally, Minerva presents us with a golden opportunity.”

“I wish you all the best,” McClare said, hoisting his glass. “I presume that a large portion of your initial capital consists of my daughter’s, which is to say my, assets?”

“Yes sir, that’s correct,” O’Toole answered. “I sold our shares in the Minerva Corporation shortly after we moved to the island. That provided a sizable portion of our startup capital.”

“I trust that with the ensuing invasion,” McClare said, “you and your professor have diversified your holdings away from the island?”

“No,” O’Toole answered without hesitation. “In fact, we’ve sunk just about everything in real estate on the island. Contrary to most speculation, we are quite confident the battle will be short and relatively painless.”

“Oh, I speculate it will be short too, Peter.” McClare walked to the bar to pour himself another drink.

“Are you a religious man, Peter?” The man apparently had bored of their previous topic; O’Toole could almost see the mental switch in gears.

“I...don’t belong to an official church, but I was raised Catholic,” O’Toole responded.

“Weren’t we all, Peter,” McClare said and chuckled. “How are you raising my grandson? I don’t know that I’ve done the best for Tara—I had counted on her mother for that—but I do know that a boy must be brought up properly.”

“We’re going to homeschool Danny,” O’Toole said. Though incredibly patient, O’Toole was tiring of this conversation. “Although we’re not going to indoctrinate—bring him up in any particular faith, he will receive an excellent moral education.”

“Well, I guess we’ll all find out,” McClare said, though in a barely audible voice. “And should I be expecting any more grandchildren?”

“Tara and I thought it best to wait for things to settle a bit on Minerva,” O’Toole answered. “But yes, I think we’ll want more children, once things calm down.”

“So Danny was an accident?” McClare asked, eyebrow raised.

“No.” O’Toole looked at his father-in-law. “My boy is no accident.”

\* \* \*

“Story!” Danny yelled, clapping his hands.

“Yes Danny, you can have a story,” Tara answered, relaxing on top of the covers next to her son. She looked at the wallpaper, with its goofy trains going around and around the room in a never ending pattern. Her father was certainly a character.

A few moments later, she began her story. As happened so often, somehow the ugliness of the world crept into her creative work, no matter how hard she tried to keep it out.

“Once upon a time, there were the Red people and the Blue people. And they were at war. The Red people would not be happy until they had killed all of the Blue people.”

“Why?” Danny asked.

“Because Danny,” Tara said in a neutral tone, “they were at war. The Blue people had killed many, many of the Red people in the past. Every one of the Red people had had friends and family killed by the Blue people.”

“Are they bad?” Danny asked.

“I just told you that they killed Red people, even children.”

“Oh.”

“Now,” Tara continued, “the *Blue* people would also not be happy, until they had killed all of the Red people. One day—”

“Why?” Danny asked.

“Because Danny, they were at war. The Red people had killed many, many of the friends and family of the Blue people.”

“Are they bad?”

“The Red people killed thousands of little children of the Blue people.”

“Oh.” Danny looked confused. “Why?”

“Because they were at war. Can I finish my story, Danny?”

“Okay.”

## Fifteen

“Armor unit one-three has been marked,” the radio operator announced. A thirteenth red icon appeared on the large monitor.

Peckard nodded. As he had hoped, the Lotosian commander had deployed his tanks to move out and “secure” the neighborhood around the harbor. Now the last one had finally passed over one of the modified manhole covers.

“[There’s no one here,]” Lieutenant Dikan reported into his radio. He had been dreading the landing for weeks. But now, despite all of the pessimistic talk of guerrilla warfare, it seemed the capitalists weren’t going to put up a fight.

Dikan had been driving up and down the streets for ten minutes, and hadn’t seen a single person. The city looked deserted. The windows on every building were covered, making it impossible to see inside.

Dikan heard nothing when his tank passed slowly over the manhole cover. He felt nothing when the cover slid aside, and a telescoping arm attached a small device to the underbelly of his tank.

General Rygar nodded as the reports came in from his men in the tanks and jeeps. He had no aerial reconnaissance, and the skyscrapers offered incredible cover for the defenders. In many respects, Rygar didn’t understand the strange society of the island. But he did know that these people could be very crafty. Rygar had needed to run a quick sweep of the theater to know what to expect.

And now, apparently, he should expect no open resistance. Perhaps, as Lugar claimed in his speeches to the troops, the capitalists running the island would sell their stocks and run back to Wall Street. After all, what do capitalists know about running an army?

Nonetheless, caution was still in order. Before marching tens of thousands of his men into the line of fire, Rygar wanted to first...prod the capitalists.

“Affirmative, armor unit four just rolled over a motorcycle at Fourth and Broadway.” Mike Reynolds panned the scene with his binoculars and shook his head. *What idiot leaves his bike out during an invasion?*

*“Armor unit six is firing on a TV store on Third and Ocean,”* the voice on the radio reported.

Mike Reynolds focused his binoculars on the tank below, just in time to see it explode.

It was clear from the excited voices on the radio that the other teams had seen similar things.

Rygar considered the possible explanations for the sudden radio silence. He thought it most likely that the capitalists were somehow jamming the radios. If they had attacked with rockets, surely one of the units would have had time to report this. But instead of a gradual loss, Rygar had lost contact with every single unit at the exact same time.

“[How long for the guns?]” Rygar asked. Now that the capitalists were being openly hostile, the general felt justified in beginning a proper attack. He just hoped the imbeciles sighting the artillery didn’t fall short and land the shells on the tanks.

*Here we go,* Tom Flanagan thought, his helicopter screaming over the buildings. The vehicle wasn’t nearly as sexy as the Apache he had mastered in his U.S. service. But, if all you needed to do was take out a few pieces that had no air defense, his current workplace machinery was more than adequate.

Flanagan dreamed of the future. With every heavy gun he took out, he’d be paid a cool five hundred grand. He certainly had no qualms about his mode of employment. The only dilemma Tom Flanagan currently faced was whether to spend his life in the casinos here—where the rich could basically live as royalty, complete with harems—or whether to return to the United States.

Rygar watched helplessly as his last artillery piece exploded into flame. His men could have done nothing; the helicopters had been extremely distant when firing their missiles.

Rygar waited for the connection with General Lugar. This was of course a formality; Rygar knew full well that he would be ordered to carry on with the invasion.

Already he was working on an inspirational speech for the men. It would definitely need to include revenge for their fallen comrades.

\* \* \*

“[Nothing,]” Lieutenant Kymun said into the microphone. He consulted his map to make sure this was indeed the objective.

“*[Then open it up,]*” Rygar’s voice ordered out of the radio speaker.

Kymun gave the signal to the engineer, who detonated the explosives covering the front door to Granite Trust’s main vaults.

As soldiers cleared away the rubble from the blast, an unexpected sound boomed through the quiet streets: The Lotosians could all hear, quite distinctly, the unmistakable and enticing noises of a quite vocal woman engaged in aggressive intercourse.

It only took a moment for each of the thousands of Lotosian infantry to spot a billboard screen featuring the visual footage of the theatrical performance. Kymun himself was still fixated on the nearest screen when the blinding flash occurred and the horrible siren began to wail.

“Got ’im!” Mike Reynolds grunted as the soldier’s left knee exploded. At precisely the same moment, five hundred ninety-nine other Lotosians also lost a shin and foot.

Reynolds waited for his next order. So long as the scoring system registered it properly, that single shot had just earned him more than he’d made in the previous year.

He looked with interest as the soldiers burst into the storefronts. Many Lotosians had fired blindly at the skyscrapers surrounding them, and a few even tried to drag their

fallen men into the alleys. But by far the majority had piled into buildings wherever their protective façade had been breached.

*“[We know exactly where you are,]” boomed the voice in perfect dialect. “[If the lights go red, you are in one of our buildings.]”* The lights in the deli turned red, then switched back. They did this quickly four times in a row.

*“[We have not killed your comrades. Do not interfere with us as we transport them to a hospital.]”*

The men all looked at Kymun. They did not want to leave the store and lose their legs as the dozens lying in the street.

Kymun watched as the armored vans raced down the street, picking up the wounded. Within minutes, the street was once again deserted.

*“[Very good,]” the voice boomed. “[Now, when your location is selected, the red lights will flicker in your building. When this happens, you are to leave your weapons and quickly exit the building. Anyone leaving a building before it is selected will soon visit our excellent hospitals. And if anyone does not leave a building within five minutes of the signal...]”*

The room rumbled as one of the smaller buildings to the east of the bank slowly crumbled to the ground.

## Sixteen

“So we’re going tomorrow, right?” Matt stated, rather than asked. “I turned down a night of clubbing with those French girls, so don’t fuck me.”

“*They* sure wouldn’t have,” Jim said and finished his beer.

“Sure, we can go tomorrow,” Quinn answered, feeling like an overworked father. Matt had been pestering him for months.

“And it has to be at night,” Matt reminded him. “I want to get a proper lesson.”

“What do you think?” Quinn asked Jim, after Matt had left the table to take a piss.

“I don’t know what sort of promises you made, but you could get jumped takin that bitch to *church*.” Jim snorted.

“Right,” Quinn said with a smile, “but really, what do you think? I’ve got to give him *something*. Maybe somewhere in Brooklyn?”

Jim considered. “Yeah, Crown Heights would work. But don’t stray too far from the Jews. And seriously,” Jim said, looking at Quinn, “don’t take him to Bed Sty.”

\* \* \*

“I still don’t see why we’re not packing,” Matt said. “You go out in the ’hood, you gotta be ready.”

“We’re not going to shoot anyone,” Quinn lectured, “so we don’t need a gun.”

As they walked farther from the subway, Matt’s excitement grew. He would never in a million years walk in this neighborhood at night, but he felt invincible with Quinn at his side. The feeling he had, just walking with the man, was simply euphoric. He was happy to be flirting with a model, say, but even then it was mostly because he could see the envy on the other men when he did it. But now, he was really having *fun*.

“You probably don’t want to advertise the fact that you’ve never been on this street before,” Quinn said, referring to Matt’s touristy fascination with the buildings covered with graffiti. “You know that there *are* white people who can walk down this



street with confidence. So if you carry yourself like you're one of them, then the guys here won't know that you're really not."

A car approached them from behind.

"Okay, since we're out here on a lark, the only danger from a drive-by is a gang initiation." Quinn turned slightly and watched as the car passed. "So I just casually check to make sure the window's rolled up whenever a car gets close. Don't stare of course; but it's perfectly within your rights to check out who's driving past you."

"Okay, that makes sense," Matt said, committing the instructions to memory, though he wondered how the tip could be applied in the summer months. "This is great stuff," he added, hoping Quinn would continue to share what, to Quinn, were obvious observations.

"Stand right here," Quinn suddenly said when they were near a parked car. Quinn walked back a dozen feet. "Now face forward. As I walk toward you, look at the reflection in the car and the shadows from the street lamp on the sidewalk. Without even moving your head, you can tell exactly where I am."

\* \* \*

"Okay, we're just gonna keep walking and not be at all nervous by these kids," Quinn informed Matt. Two black teenagers, loudly joking and pushing each other, approached them. "Remember, they're not used to seeing two white guys walking around at night. They'll probably think we're cops. We'll make brief eye contact to show we're not afraid, and we'll look them up and down once to assess the situation. But once we decide that we could kill them if we had to, we shift our eyes forward again and walk right on by."

The two groups of males halted their conversations as they passed warily in the quiet night. Quinn listened intently as they passed to ensure that their footfalls became progressively more distant.

"White motherfuckers!" one of the boys yelled a few moments later.

"What pussies," Quinn chuckled. He turned to Matt, who was obviously quite alarmed. "Notice that they didn't say shit until *after* we passed. And notice that now

they're yelling louder, since we didn't turn and chase them after the first insult. As long as we keep moving, we're fine."

Matt nodded his head. Quinn's analysis made sense, but he still wished they were packing.

## Seventeen

General Rygar sighed. This was a dangerous game that Lugar was playing. By allowing the United States to supplement its advisors with “peacekeeping troops,” Lugar was jeopardizing Lotos’ very independence.

He knew he must crush the capitalists, and quickly. But what could Rygar do? After the initial capture of almost one-fifth of his men, Rygar had been very conservative with his forward deployments. He had immediately secured food supplies from the stores in the vicinity of the harbor, and set up a strong perimeter. The buildings occupied by his men had been thoroughly searched for booby traps, such as the demolition charges that had caught him so unawares on the first day.

But beyond this, Rygar could make little progress. The loudspeaker announcements had been true to their word: Any Lotosian soldier spotted north of the so-called Third Street would have a leg destroyed. This intolerable situation would quickly reduce any company of troops into scattered groups hiding in hardware stores. Few men had returned from such encounters; Rygar didn’t know how many were still active in the city, looting from shop to shop. For all the general knew, they had all been captured or killed.

Rygar drummed his fingers on the table, studying the large map of the island. His three halfhearted attempts at northern amphibious landings had met with total failure; he had lost contact with the boats, and never heard from them again. His attempt to protect his men with tarps coated with old tires had likewise failed; although they did indeed shield the men from the snipers’ bullets, the tarps proved very flammable, as the capitalist forces quickly demonstrated with incendiary devices.

*[The capitalist forces...]* Rygar didn’t know whether to believe the rumors that the snipers were in fact robots. He would have loved to show his men a human corpse to prove the contrary, but unfortunately, his men had been unable to kill a single enemy. Their shots were always preceded by the blinding light, making it impossible to locate the shooters.

The supply of fresh water was dwindling, Rygar noted as he studied a set of figures on his desk. Although world opinion was clearly with them, and in particular was outraged by the deliberate maiming of Lotosian soldiers, nonetheless Rygar's men were terrified. A disturbing balance had settled on the conflict since its inception ten days previously. Every day, Rygar's men would slowly expand the front, seizing more and more buildings. But those buildings colored in red (on the mysterious maps that had just started showing up in the Lotosian camp) were always booby trapped or heavily defended by sniper fire. Those buildings in green, in contrast, could be taken with little trouble; only a few civilians in the buildings themselves resisted.

The problem was that he was quickly running out of green sites. Lugar had assured him more supplies would be forthcoming—hopefully the Americans would provide assistance—but Rygar wasn't sure he could wait. If he had to cut rations, the nighttime desertions (which were now losing him more troops than the snipers) would multiply. Rygar had already implemented a new rotation in the sentries, so that the men would always be working with some strangers each new watch. Even so, it was impossible to prevent hundreds of men—especially those with no families on Lotos—from sneaking into the city at night.

One couldn't really blame the men. They saw the steady stream of amputees flooding back into their ranks each day. (The capitalists would always collect the maimed, perform a quick surgery to prevent infection, and then deposit the injured men at the front in pilotless trolleys.) Many could perform satisfactorily after appending a wooden stump to their ruined legs, but the psychological toll on the others was obvious.

The insidious capitalists had resorted to their favorite weapon as well: money. The injured told of amazing medical facilities and promises that defectors would be given jobs and ounces of gold for their wise decision. All the men need do was move northward under cover of night; as long as they were in groups no larger than five and unarmed, they would be met with hospitality.

Rygar nodded his head as he converged on a decision. He would order all of his men to rush uptown and seize the major office buildings. Perhaps thousands would be lost, but if he could relocate his headquarters to that central location, Rygar just might be able to spread out and secure the entire city.

\* \* \*

*How long are they gonna wait?* Mike Reynolds thought as the soldiers continued to sprint through the street. He had been watching this for over thirty seconds and still had received no orders.

“Ahh...” Reynolds whispered as his helmet beeped. He had *finally* been given the green light to just *waste* these motherfuckers.

Men screamed as bullets ripped through the charge. The officers obeyed Rygar’s order to shoot anyone trying to enter a building. The men needed to reach the center of the city or the invasion was over.

“Units eight and nine evacuated,” the operator said. The display on the monitor changed accordingly.

Peckard nodded his head. As he had predicted, the column of troops was heading straight up Broadway and a few adjacent streets. The evacuation procedures that he had worked out with the insurance companies would hopefully ensure that none of their clients died in this last gasp effort.

“[We can’t break through!]” Lieutenant Kipson yelled. The latest explosions did nothing but char the metal seals on the doors to the giant building.

Rygar surveyed the scene. Hundreds of his men were burrowing under the bodies of their fallen comrades in order to escape the fire raining down. This time the capitalists were not using sniper rifles.

“[Try the other buildings!]” Rygar ordered.

\* \* \*

“[*Very good,*]” the voice boomed over the loudspeaker. The last of the fallen had been removed from the streets in the swift armored vehicles.

*“[Now you will lay down your arms and leave the building when you are notified,]”* the voice continued.

“All teams in place,” the operator said.

“Release them,” Peckard said. He was about to see if his ploy—having defectors march past the smoking buildings in mock surrender—would convince the bunkered soldiers to give up as well.

“[Shall we fire on them?]” Lieutenant Vezard asked. Rygar had given explicit instructions that, after seizing the buildings, anyone seen surrendering was to be executed.

Rygar looked out of the gaping hole in the building at the men marching past. They looked frightened as they walked with their hands on their heads.

“[No,]” Rygar finally said. He put down his weapon and waited for the signal—the flickering red lights—to be given to the building into which he and several dozen others had scrambled to avoid being mowed down from the elevated shooters.

Lugar’s foolish gamble had failed. General Rygar was ready to see if the capitalists would keep their word.

## PART III

## Eighteen

“Shit,” Matt muttered as the dealer placed a Five of Clubs on the table to his right. The player, an Asian man in his fifties or early sixties, waved his hand to indicate that he wanted no additional cards.

The dealer, a very attractive woman in her twenties, turned her attention to Matt. His cards totaled sixteen, while she displayed a forbidding Queen of Hearts. Matt glanced at the stack of chips in front of him and felt queasy; following the professor’s lead, Matt had wagered a full five ounces.

Matt glanced at the professor, who seemed quite smug. *I would be too if I were sitting on a fucking twenty.*

“Normally honey,” Matt said to the dealer, “I’d let you be as rough as you want, but for right now, hit me gentle-like.”

Mason was glad to see that, notwithstanding the sophomoric flirting that so entertained the other players (if not the dealer), Matthew had properly scraped the table with his index finger.

The anticipation bubbled inside his guts as the dealer slid the card from the shoe. Before Matt could tell exactly what it was, he sensed the paint and knew he had busted.

“Oh sweetheart, you’re killin me,” Matt said weakly, forcing a grin. He leaned over to the Asian man—who had to be just fucking *loaded* judging from the piles of chips in front of him—and whispered, in a tone loud enough for the entire table to hear, “I guess it really isn’t rape, since what red-blooded man wouldn’t consent?” Matt gestured at the dealer, who had by now flipped her Eight of Diamonds and was reckoning with the bets of the players with active hands.

The Asian man’s entire body jiggled with glee. Matt knew the man had never encountered someone like *him* before.

“It’s all right Matthew, you made the correct play,” Mason said. The hand had yielded a net gain of two for his running count of the decks, and Mason, feigning absentmindedness, adjusted one of his chip stacks accordingly.



“Actually,” Matt said, ignoring the professor’s move and placing out the minimum bet of one-eighth ounce of gold, “I’m trying to *win* money. If I wanted to shower the lovely Jennifer with my hard-earned wealth, she’d at least need to don a summer dress.”

Jennifer Heyden made no indication that she heard the remark. The American’s behavior was actually ideal from her point of view; it kept the men—who were all quite down except for the older one—at the table, and the exaggerated compliments made for above-average tips. Heyden also decided that Stacy had been absolutely right—wearing the casino blouse *without* a bra was an extremely profitable fashion move.

Heyden made a note to herself to give the boy a Blackjack after the next shuffle. Obvious as his remarks were, he at least understood class and would keep the table’s lusting down to an acceptable level of decency.

“I understand your objectives,” Mason said, then added, “both of them. And unless you are keeping exquisite count, which I daresay you are not, then drawing on a sixteen against the dealer’s ten is the correct move.”

Matt shot the Asian man an exasperated look, as if to ask, “Can you believe this horseshit?” He turned to Mason.

“Okay, so you’re saying that, even though I had a sixteen and the top card was a ten, it was the correct move for me to hit?”

“Yes,” Mason answered immediately. He tried not to let the boy’s antics distract him from the count.

“Suppose she had flipped a six herself?” Matt persisted. “So that she would’ve busted if I didn’t take the top card. Would you still say I should’ve hit?”

“Yes,” Mason answered immediately.

“Well I don’t know what the hell you’re talking about,” Matt decided after a moment of thought. “And I can’t believe I’m following your advice. If the lovely Jennifer and I both have sixteen, and the top card is a ten, I say the correct move is for me to stand pat on my hand. You’re saying I should hit and bust?”

Mason sighed. It would be difficult to explain the concept to Matthew, who undoubtedly had never mastered the terms *ex ante* and *ex post*.

“What I am saying,” Mason said slowly, “is that, with the information you had available at the moment of your decision, taking an additional card maximized the expected number of chips you would have at the end of the hand.”

Matt leaned back in his chair and held up his hands, palms facing the ceiling. Again he turned to the Asian man.

“I’ve heard plenty of clichés about ivory tower academics, but this guy’s the real deal, ain’t he?” Matt nudged the man with his right elbow. “Now I know your people are good with numbers, so maybe *you* can explain what the fuck he just said. But I’m sticking by my guns, and saying if I’ve got a sixteen, and Venus here has a sixteen, and the top card is a ten, then it is simply a MISTAKE for me to hit.”

“Matthew,” Mason said, trying to suppress a smirk. He had grown quite used to this type of “common sense” anti-intellectualism in his hard life. “The scientific approach to Blackjack cannot concern itself with ‘feelings,’ or intuition, or luck. It rests on an analysis of the cards you can see at the moment of your decision, and the objective probabilities of the possible outcomes of the strategies available to you. If you simulate the game in a computer, you will find that the highest long-run payoff follows from always drawing in that situation.”

“So then why’d I bust?” Matt said, bored with the conversation. His attention had once again returned to Jennifer’s nipples. He wondered if the no-bra thing was a personal decision, or an actual casino policy. Even though he’d moved to Minerva four months ago, he still hadn’t adjusted to its outrageous possibilities.

“Well, that was just bad luck,” Mason said, distracted by his newly dealt eleven.

Matt sat bolt upright. *This guy really IS full of shit*, he realized with amazement.

\* \* \*

“How’d we do, gentlemen?” Tara asked as the group assembled at the agreed location.

“Well, I got two phone numbers,” Matt said. “And it only cost me fifteen ounces.”

“What about the good Doctor?” Tara asked with a smile. On the boat to the casino, she had been quite amused at Mason’s critical remarks of anyone who played any game *other* than Blackjack, since they were quite obviously “throwing their money away.”

“I experienced a statistically expected dip in my lifetime earnings,” Mason answered truthfully. “But before you gloat, I would like to point out that it can be fully accounted for by the stochastic elements involved.”

“He had back luck,” Matt explained.

## Nineteen

The phone rang, rousing Ryan Miller from his fitful sleep. He scowled at the containers of egg foo yong and General Tso's chicken on his coffee table. The heavily marked copy of Kant's *Perpetual Peace and Other Essays* fell off the couch as Miller reached for the phone.

"Miller," he said, still drowsy.

"Ryan, it's Jim," the familiar voice said over the receiver. "*Turn on CNN. We're all fucked.*"

Miller, now alert, grabbed the remote and flipped on his small television. It was already set to CNN.

The "BREAKING NEWS" was a press conference in Minerva at the law offices of Feynman and Goldmeir. Edward Feynman was at the podium, and seated to his left was a harsh Lotosian.

"Lugar..." Miller whispered in utter incomprehension.

"That's right," Feynman could be heard saying, as Miller turned up the volume. "The retired general will have his new residence somewhere on Minervan territory, with the actual location being withheld for security reasons. Yes, as you say, there were many who disagreed with his politics, but I'm sure bygones will be bygones. In any event, we all know the women of Reliant will ensure his safety. Yes," Feynman said, pointing to a reporter in the back.

"*Are there any plans for elections, or some other mechanisms, to select replacements for the posts vacated by General Lugar and the other members of the Ramash party?*"

"Well," Feynman began with a smile, "as I already explained, the general himself, and the other officials who will step down next week, have made no special provisions in this regard. They are simply relinquishing their control over the property that they are now returning to the rightful owners, the Lotosian people."

"What the hell...?" Miller muttered.

"*What's the reaction from Washington?*" someone yelled.

“I don’t know, since nobody told them,” Feynman said, causing the room to burst into laughter. “But in all seriousness, that’s none of our business, nor is it the business of the general or his subordinates. In this agreement,” Feynman paused to hold up a thick stack of papers, “it’s all spelled out. As one of its final acts, the Lotosian government will return the balance of the generous American aid package negotiated last spring. Now, as far as the airfields and barracks, the United States is certainly welcome to open talks with the proper owners of the real estate on which they’re presently located. As I said, that’s not my business; it’s between the Pentagon and the individual Lotosians.”

“Holy *shit!*” Miller said as he jumped up from the couch.

\* \* \*

“But is it going to stop here, or can it spread?” President Greene asked. “What’s to stop every Third World dictator from selling his country and moving to the island?”

“That’s an excellent question, Mr. President.” Miller paused to collect his thoughts. Six hours earlier, he hadn’t thought the Lotosian maneuver possible, so he had to be careful in his predictions. “My short answer is: I don’t think that will be a problem, at least not for the next several years. We have to understand exactly why the deal works with Lugar: People are willing to pay for title deeds, issued in Minerva, for land and other property located on the Lotosian mainland.

“Now the legal problems—and this, I must admit, is what I for one never saw coming—were solved by Lugar’s abdication. In a sense, he renounced his sovereign rights as the political ruler of Lotos, and thus the entire island reverted to unowned property under Minervan law. So at that point, a whole body of customary law kicks in, and specifies who the default owners of this land should be. The Feynman and Goldmeir firm printed up official titles and distributed them to the citizens of Lotos accordingly.

“So now the question is,” Miller continued, basically retracing the steps he had himself used in the moments after the bombshell had dropped, “what would happen if Feynman tried this approach with, say, Great Britain?”

The room stared dumbly at Miller. He could tell that they had absolutely no idea.

“Well,” Miller resumed, “they could certainly print up ownership deeds to Big Ben and Buckingham Palace; nothing will stop them from doing that. They can even mail these slips of paper to the residents of England, and tell them they’re the rightful owners. But the real question is, will anybody *buy* these pieces of paper from the ‘new’ owners?”

“And the answer to that, of course, is no. Because the Queen hasn’t renounced her throne, and the Prime Minister hasn’t resigned, and because the British police will still arrest anyone who tries to walk off with the Crown jewels, nobody is going to honor our hypothetical deeds.

“But the situation is different in the case of Lugar. He *has* officially renounced his position, and—no doubt with generous bribes supplied by Minervan firms—he has convinced his entire government to do the same. My guess is that Reliant—that’s the dominant police agency in Minerva—is blanketing the island with its officers as we speak. For a nominal fee, they’ll offer to defend the claims on the property titles issued by Minervan firms, and no doubt the clueless Lotosians will take them up on their offer. I’m sure the Lotosian police were caught just as flat-footed as we were by the announcement, and anyway, why fight it? The average Lotosian will be much much wealthier in the new regime.”

Greene had heard enough from the legal scholar. Although he admired the young man’s frankness, he was still furious that this development had been so completely unexpected.

“General Riggs,” Greene said, turning his attention from Miller, “what’s happening with our troops?”

“Nothing, Mr. President.” Riggs tried to restrain a smirk. “So far none of the newly liberated natives—and none of the female cops with nets—has challenged our installations. A few ‘Yankee go home’ demonstrations are underway, but that’s standard fare for these people.”

## Twenty

“Hurry up, Danny!” Tara yelled. “We don’t want to miss the subway!”

Danny reluctantly dropped the shell on the ground and scurried back to his parents and Mason.

“Why exactly are we rushing?” Mason inquired. He preferred leisurely strolls, especially when he saw no rational argument against them.

“Because it’s a holiday,” Tara reminded him. “The trains don’t run as often. I don’t want to get stuck waiting at the station for fifteen minutes.”

“I’m not sure I follow you,” Mason informed her. “Are you suggesting that by walking faster, we will reduce the expected waiting time at the platform?”

*Here we go*, O’Toole thought, looking at his watch. He didn’t care what happened, so long as they got to Broadway before ten. The parade (commemorating Minerva’s ten-year anniversary) started at noon, and the streets would soon be impossible to navigate.

“David, what *are* you talking about?” Tara asked.

“The subways come at a certain, regular frequency, yes?” Mason asked her.

“Yeah, about every fifteen minutes. It’s a holiday,” Tara reminded him again.

“Quite so,” Mason agreed. “Now then, do you know when the next train is arriving?”

“No,” Tara answered, growing impatient with the old man. Sometimes he could really be thick! “That’s why we’re rushing.”

“But how do you know,” Mason persisted, “that the next train isn’t arriving in, say, thirty seconds, so we have no hope of catching it? And that therefore we are rushing, only to wait *longer* at the platform? Yes, the greater interval between successive trains makes it that much worse if we just miss the next one. But it also means there is a lower probability that we *will* just miss the next train, since they run less frequently. In the absence of further information, I think the two effects cancel, and that we should walk at the same speed we would on any other day.”

Tara didn't say a word. She was often wary of answering the man's challenges, since she always suspected that he himself didn't believe them.

"I gather that I haven't convinced you," Mason said after a few moments of silence. "Let me try it this way: If we hurry, we can reach the station in about five minutes. But if we walk normally, we can reach it in about ten." Mason ceased talking long enough to catch his breath. "You believe that it is better to hurry and reach the station in five minutes, rather than walking and reaching it in ten."

"Ok-a-ay," Tara said. She looked down at Danny and made an exasperated face. He giggled.

"Now what if I were to tell you," Mason said with growing excitement, "that this morning I set ahead your clocks and watches by precisely five minutes. Would you then agree with me that we should slow down?"

"David," Tara said, ashamed at herself for actually glancing at the clock on a nearby bank, "*did* you change our clocks?"

"Of course not," Mason answered. "I'm just trying to show you the absurdity of your stance. Clearly you didn't think, a moment ago, that your position relied upon the fact that it is now 9:38 rather than 9:33—"

"Leave it to an economist," Tara said to her husband, "to start an argument with a false assumption. But you're right," she said, now to Mason. "Danny, come over here."

*What a nightmare*, O'Toole thought, looking at his watch. Tara had led Danny by the hand to a small patch of grass in front of a pastry shop.

"Sit down, Danny," Tara said, pulling out a sandwich from her purse. "Since we have so much time, we're going to have a picnic!"

"Yay! A picnic!" Danny clapped his hands and obediently plopped his bottom on the grass.

O'Toole sighed and looked at Mason.

"Why?" he asked rhetorically.

As Danny munched half of his peanut butter sandwich, O'Toole hailed a cab.

\* \* \*



“Okay,” O’Toole said, looking at the brochure. “Danny, your mother and I are giving a speech at noon, so you’re going with Professor Mason to the space exhibit.”

“Okay,” his son answered, without turning his head from the window.

Daniel normally would be enthusiastic with this news; he was absolutely fascinated by the rockets that went up almost weekly from the launch pad a few kilometers off the western coast of Minerva, carrying satellites or scientific experiments from countries all over the world. But Daniel was currently fixated on the platforms outside the subway glass. He was (mentally) extending a metallic pole from the subway car onto the current station’s platform. As the subway pulled away from the station, it was Daniel’s responsibility to lift the pole and hold it elevated until he could rest it at the next station. Failure to do so would result in the destruction of the pole, as it smashed against the wall of the corridor rushing by.

“Okay,” O’Toole continued, “so you guys will probably be tied up till about two. What are we doing after the speech?” O’Toole asked Tara. “I’m rather interested in the bubble cities.”

Although eased by the acquisition of Lotos, the population problem continued to vex the Minervans. It would soon be profitable to construct floating neighborhoods on huge barges off the coast, offering impeccable security and privileged living space to the wealthiest citizens.

“B-o-o-ring,” Tara moaned. “Who cares about tomorrow’s suburbs?” She snatched the brochure from O’Toole. “I’m surprised you didn’t vote for the desalination plants,” she teased, looking over the day’s options.

“You might try the submarine exhibit,” Mason suggested. Although Minerva’s dominance of the computer and communications industries was expected by everyone, most had been surprised at the innovations in submersibles. “They actually take you out to sea and show off some of the latest model’s features.”

“Nope,” Tara vetoed, not looking up, “I get claustrophobic in those things.”

“They make them very big now, Mom,” Daniel informed her, though without shirking his duty of hoisting the pole protruding from their car.

“If the island isn’t big enough for your mother,” Mason said, “I doubt a submarine would be.”

“Oh, I should really make an appearance at the Drake exhibit,” Tara said, still looking over the brochure. She wasn’t fond of the controversial painter, and thought his work too crude to warrant the title “Minervan art.” But she didn’t quite understand it, and so wanted to give it another chance.

“B-o-o-ring,” O’Toole said, knowing full well he would be attempting to interpret nonsensical brush strokes later that afternoon.

\* \* \*

“Gimme a cotton candy and a plain black coffee,” O’Toole said to the vendor.

The vendor first retrieved the cotton candy, and handed it over the counter to Tara. Then he filled a styrofoam cup with steaming coffee. He picked up a spoonful of sugar and brought it near the cup.

“No sugar!” O’Toole said.

“No sugar?” the man asked.

“No sugar.”

“You want milk?” the man asked helpfully. He even held up the container of milk to make his meaning clear.

“No milk,” O’Toole answered. No matter how hard he tried, he could not convey to vendors that “plain black coffee” meant plain black coffee.

The vendor gave the man his change and smiled as the pretty couple walked away, the man with his coffee and the woman with her cotton candy. In his four years on the island, he had learned that human nature was the same here as in Manhattan: It was always better to ask, in order that irate customers wouldn’t come back two minutes later demanding sugar or milk in their coffee.

\* \* \*

“The lobster bisque, please,” Danny told Mason. It was fortunate for his parents that the seafood farms around Minerva made lobster as plentiful as tuna, for Danny had developed quite a taste for the exquisite.

As the old man and young boy walked down the street, carefully eating the hot soup, Mason resumed his lecture.

“Now Daniel, you are only a few years younger than our society. In many ways, your life itself reflects Minerva. Like you, it is currently young and small, vulnerable to all sorts of dangers. But it will grow up to be mature and strong, the most powerful in the world.”

“Like me?” Danny asked.

“Yes,” Mason said after a moment’s consideration. “Like you.”

“Where are we going?” Danny asked a little while later. He had noticed that the throng of celebrants had thinned, and the street was as deserted as could be expected on Minerva.

“We’ve got some time before we meet your parents,” Mason explained. “I want to show you the docks where the immigrants land.”

“That’s a bad place,” Danny informed him. “We shouldn’t go there.”

Mason laughed.

“It’s true that the crime rates are higher there than in other parts of the island,” he told the boy. “But I’m sure we will be in no danger.”

As they walked, Mason marveled at how resilient ancient prejudices were, the fear of the unknown. Even though the steady stream of immigrants was the lifeblood of the fledgling island, most of its residents scorned the newcomers.

\* \* \*

The audience roared as O’Toole stepped back from the microphone and waved. Tara took his arm and they walked off the stage.

“I didn’t realize we were such celebrities,” O’Toole said to his wife.

“No Peter,” Tara corrected him. “*I’m* a celebrity—‘the richest woman in the world,’ and a looker to boot. But *you* are a legend.”

“You’re kidding,” O’Toole said.

“No, I’m not.” Tara stopped and turned to him. “Peter, if you could only *see* the way people in the audience looked at you. You’re a god to these people.”

\* \* \*

Mason and Danny watched as the dirty, tired people shuffled off the boat and onto the pier. Agents from different insurance companies called out in various languages at the immigrants, trying to convince them that *their* temporary policies were by far the fairest.

One man kept his twin daughters close to him as he eyed the onlookers. Although Mason and Danny couldn't have known it, the man had fled his native country after his wife had been raped and killed by soldiers. On the cramped ship to Minerva, he had cut his daughters' hair to make them less attractive. The father was quite wary of the promises of employment and housing offered by the man in a Western suit at the table, though the suit's perfect dialect was a point in his favor.

"Where are they going?" Danny asked, as several Reliant officers escorted a group of twenty or so men in orange clothes into a company van.

"They have to go to a special holding area," Mason explained.

"Why?" Danny asked.

"A government somewhere declared that they were criminals, and shipped them here," Mason said. "So they are kept in buildings designed to hold them, until they can prove their trustworthiness and build up a deposit so that someone will insure them."

"Oh," Danny said.

Darrell Holmes eyed the old man and boy as he leaned against the moving company's van. He had no idea what the odd pair were doing, but the old man had on a funky suit that suggested money.

Darrell, a clever seventeen-year-old from Detroit, had moved to Minerva only three months before. He had been amazed by how far just a few days' work unloading cargo would go on the strange island. Of course, the housing situation was ridiculous; Darrell had opted for a bed in a dormitory that was far more crowded than any military barracks that his friends back in the States were suffering through. But besides that, just

a few days on the dock was enough to pay for decent meals and nights at the bar for the rest of the month.

Now that he'd gotten a feel for the place, though, Darrell had stopped going to his dock job. As was true in any big city, the real money in Minerva went to those with a little brains and a lot of balls. At first Darrell had been at a loss to break in to the action: you could walk into the local pharmacy and buy a kilo of cocaine, for Chrissake. But soon enough, Darrell had hooked up with Larry and Michael. They had had a pretty sweet deal, working for the moving company on paper but making their real money in between jobs. Whether it was fencing stolen property, getting an immigrant a new identity, or smuggling in weapons that were illegal even in Minerva, the three of them could always find something to do on their way back from a job.

And when the three guys had nothing lined up, they could always count on an opportunity presenting itself at the docks.

Danny slowly eased his head to the left, trying to examine the three men without letting them know it. Mason had noticed them as well, and led Danny down an alley. It was broad daylight, and Mason wanted to let them pass so he could stop his foolish worrying.

Darrell snorted. When they had followed the pair from the docks, Darrell didn't really think anything would come of it; he was mostly just curious what the hell those two were doing, gawking like tourists in this section of the city. But c'mon, if the old man was going to just *hand over* his stuff, then Darrell would obviously take it.

"Let's make this quick," he said. He scanned the street quickly before the three boys ducked into the alley.

When Mason saw the three teenagers turn the corner, his stomach collapsed. He mentally reviewed his possessions, which fortunately were not that valuable. But he was utterly humiliated at the situation in which he had placed Danny, and it was entirely his own fault.

“Okay gramps, hand it over,” Darrell said, raising the gun slightly, but keeping it inside his jacket pocket.

Something about the young man’s tone *irritated* Mason. It was the same...*smugness* that so infuriated him in the classroom. Mason would much rather have a student cheat on an exam than scoff at him during a lecture, thinking he knew more than the professor. Mason momentarily forgot all about Danny.

“I will do no such thing,” Mason answered.

Darrell snorted. He pulled out the gun and pointed it out Mason’s chest.

“I’m not fuckin around old man,” Darrell said. “Give me your gold...and that watch.”

Mason’s eyes left Darrell’s stare to glance down at the watch, a gift from his niece. The very *idea* that he would give it up to some *punk* who had no conception of its value to him!

“Let me tell you something, young man,” Mason said, his eyes once again returning Darrell’s stare. “I know you’ve been taught that the world owes you something, but I assure you, it does not. You think that because your great-grandfather was a slave, that gives you the right to point a gun at me? Well my *father* wasn’t enslaved, he was *cooked*. But you know what, young man? I shrugged it off, worked two jobs, and got a Ph.D. So go point your gun at someone else; I don’t owe you a thing.”

Darrell was stunned. Was this guy fucking *nuts*? Holmes took a step forward and swiveled the gun, now pointing it at the young boy’s head.

“I said, give us that watch,” Holmes repeated.

When the youth had pointed the gun at Danny, Mason imploded with rage. He was *furious* that this coward, rather than answer his arguments, would choose instead to threaten a child.

Knowing that the solution to a large problem often consisted in its reduction to smaller chunks, Mason looked at the other teenagers. They were clearly nervous at the escalation.

“How long have you gentlemen even *lived* here?” Mason asked. “You don’t understand how this society works yet, do you? Well let me give you a quick lesson:

The petty violations of the rules laid down by insurers? That's no big deal. No one really cares about that, which is why you haven't been caught and punished. But do you really think Reliant is going to allow an eight-year-old boy to be *gunned down* in broad day without finding out who did it?"

Mason paused, and saw that the two teenagers were interested in his comments. He also knew that the leader would not pull the trigger, at least not yet.

"When Reliant officers swarm the docks, asking if anybody noticed us, and offering a hundred ounces for anyone who can provide details leading to a conviction, do you really believe that no one will remember you fellows? Hmm?"

"Finally," Mason said, pointing his finger at the two followers, one after the other, "do you two really think it's wise to become accessories to murder because your friend here wants to prove he's a man? Do you think he'll admit to the Reliant detectives that it was *he* who shot the little boy, or is it just possible he'll sell you two out for an offer of immunity?"

This last move was a definite gamble; Minervan justice typically didn't feature plea bargains. Since most crimes were punished by large fines, an offer of leniency in exchange for a confession was seen more clearly for what it essentially was: bribed testimony. To protect their reputation for integrity, most arbitrators wouldn't accept cases in which the plaintiff had paid the financial obligations of an admitted criminal, especially if the other defendants were insured by rival carriers. In situations like those, no matter how solid the evidence, a ruling for the plaintiff would appear to outsiders as a purchased verdict.

Nonetheless, Mason could see that he now had the upper hand, and decided the risk was worth it. The three thieves were almost certainly newcomers from the U.S.

"C'mon Darrell, that watch is a piece a shit anyway," Larry said, backing away from the situation.

"And now I know your name," Mason said to Darrell. "So you'll have to shoot both of us." Mason turned to the other two. "If you boys run now, you can honestly tell the Reliant officers that you were long gone when the shots were fired."

Something about the old man's tone frightened Larry and Michael; it seemed that he *wanted* to provoke Darrell. What had started out as a tactic of intimidation might now

end up as a double homicide. Larry was the first to turn and run, which prompted Michael to quickly follow.

Darrell raised the gun, aiming it between the old man's eyes. He rotated his wrist and held the gun sideways. Its barrel was less than a foot from the man's face.

"Move away," Mason instructed Danny, pushing him back with his left palm. Danny, eyes wide with fright, took a few additional steps backward into the alley.

"Now it's just us," Mason whispered to Darrell.

"I don't know what you're up to," Darrell said slowly, "but I've still got the gun. And you're giving me that watch."

"You really don't know what I am, do you?" Mason hissed. He took a step forward, pressing his forehead against the gun.

"Old man," Darrell started, shaking his head slowly in amazement, "I really don't want to blow your fuckin head off in front of the kid, but I will. *Give me the watch.*"

Darrell's mind raced. He decided that he would wait another three seconds, and after that he would pistol whip the crazy bastard and take the watch and whatever else he had on him. The street had been empty, but that had been several minutes ago. No telling who might walk by any—

The old man began laughing. It was a low, *sinister* laugh, borne of complete and utter confidence.

"What more am I going to have to show you, boy?" the man sneered. "Do you really think an old man with his grandson would act like this?"

Mason took a step forward, forcing Darrell to back up. He kept the gun planted firmly against his forehead.

"Back up old man," Darrell said, his voice lower than before. "I swear to God, I'll shoot you right now."

"Of course, they always bring *Him* into it," Mason said with a chuckle. "But in my experience, young Darrell, I've found that your God will allow me my fun. He has yet to interfere when I encounter a worthless wretch like *you.*"

Darrell's stomach fell, and his knees buckled. His deep confusion had now given way to mounting fear.

"I'll...do it," Darrell said.



“Oh, wouldn’t that be a shame?” Mason said with cruel sarcasm. “Then I’d have to find a different body. And I was *so* fond of this decrepit shell. Oh *please* don’t evict me, young Darrell.”

*What the fuck?!?* Darrell’s mind screamed.

“Don’t you get it yet, boy!” Mason growled. Darrell took a step back. “Don’t you know a DEMON when you see it?!”

Darrell’s mounting fear was now full-fledged terror. He really didn’t understand what was happening, but suddenly his pride didn’t require sticking around for the old man’s watch. At this point, Darrell honestly did not give a flying *fuck* what people would say if they knew he’d come out of the mugging empty-handed.

“I know everything about you, young Darrell,” Mason said, walking forward. Darrell matched his steps by moving backward, toward the street. “I know how things were back in America, and I know why you came here. And yes, I know how you used to look at him. No Darrell, I don’t think that makes you a *faggot*, do you?”

Darrell was now more confused than ever. Was the man talking about Bradley? Sure, Darrell had always admired his abs, but it wasn’t anything sexual. Was it?

“GET OUT OF HERE!!” the man suddenly screamed. Darrell turned and ran, faster than he had ever run in his life.

Once the boy had turned the corner, Mason’s body began to quiver. He fell to his hands and knees, and broke out in a cold sweat. He glanced over at Danny, who was staring at him without emotion.

Ashamed, Mason quickly looked away. He reflected on the terrible things he had said, and was certain that Tara would never speak to him again. His eyes welled with tears, and he began to vomit on the street.

Danny stood still, watching the professor throw up. He hadn’t been able to hear much of what the professor had said to those robbers, but he had certainly shown that nigger who was boss.

## Twenty-One

Steven Peckard looked at his watch quite deliberately as Tom Brady entered the room and hurried to the only remaining seat at the table.

“Mr. Brady, I trust you didn’t have another run-in with the ladies of Reliant?” Peckard asked. The room chuckled. Brady just smiled.

“Gentlemen,” Peckard officially began, looking over the group of elegantly dressed Minervan powerbrokers, “I want to thank you all for coming. I’ve been consulting with most of you for several years now, and I’m sure most of you have interacted with each other in the past, but I thought it would be helpful for us all to get together in the same room and talk.”

“One well-placed bomb and the CIA could sleep at night,” Paul Kennedy cracked. Some of the men laughed.

“That’s a very valid concern, Mr. Kennedy,” Peckard answered, with no amusement. “I assure you, I have had the finest security teams assembled for the protection of my own person, as well as my company and its assets.”

Peckard paused and pulled out a manila folder. He walked over to Kennedy and placed it in front of him.

“Your joke is rather ironic,” Peckard continued, “inasmuch as no fewer than four of your Railworker union members are CIA informants.”

The grin vanished from Kennedy’s face, and the other men became very still.

Peckard retrieved fourteen more manila folders, and placed them in front of the respective men.

“My counterintelligence agents have discovered CIA infiltration in each of your respective firms or unions,” Peckard told the men. “Gentlemen, we have to get serious. You can no longer concentrate solely on higher dividends for your investors or better dental plans for your workers. With the incorporation of Lotos into Minerva’s legal and economic framework, we are now presenting a very real threat to the major governments of the world. We can no longer afford to ignore them. I assure you, they are not ignoring us.”

Peckard returned to his seat. He waited several moments for the men to review the dossiers in their folders.

“How did you obtain this information?” asked Drake Skinner, current head of the Barons, an elite association of airline pilots.

“This first pass was simple enough,” answered Peckard. “Indeed, without having access to your records, my agencies could do little more. They simply matched the observable lifestyle choices of a random selection of your members—what they drive, where they live, what schools their children attend—against our estimates of their income. When large discrepancies were found, we investigated more closely. The dossiers in your folders are by no means exhaustive; I just want us all to admit that we have a problem.”

“And what exactly do you want us to do about it?” asked Kennedy. “Have all my men sign a loyalty oath?”

“Of course not, Mr. Kennedy,” Peckard answered, annoyed. “After all, spies are not averse to lying. But what I have done in my own company, and what I urge each of you to do in yours, is conduct a thorough housecleaning with an eye to security. There is no shortage of excellent consultants in these matters; you have all been provided with a list of my personal recommendations. They can help you identify the points of vulnerability in your organizations, and the steps you can take to remedy them in our so-very-open society.”

\* \* \*

“Those of you who were involved in the Lotosian invasion know that, at that time, I favored a very aggressive strategy, which,” Peckard said with a slight smile, “turned out to be rather effective. However, in the present situation, I think we must avoid open battle with the industrialized powers at all costs. I’m sure Mr. Kraft and Hutchison agree with me.” Peckard nodded at the heads of Carecoe and Prudence, Minerva’s insurance giants.

“Are you expecting an attack?” George Ribald, newly elected president of the Minerva Militia, asked.

“Not at the present time,” Peckard answered. He could see the relief on several faces. As he had hoped, the CIA informants had scared the men. They now seemed much more trusting of his guidance.

“As I’m sure you all know,” Peckard continued, “the United Nations has passed fifteen resolutions to date condemning certain unsavory practices on our fair island. Now any one of these issues—whether it’s child prostitution, narcotics, or money laundering—would probably be enough to whip up the enfranchised masses of the world into a war frenzy. But before that happens, the U.N. will have to go through the motions: They’ll slap us with embargoes, then sanctions, then a full blockade, before they can start dropping bombs.”

“Tom, are your boys up to a fight?” Ribald asked Brady.

“Against pirates? Sure. Against the U.S. Navy? Hell no.” Brady had been urged by several of his subordinates—notably Mark Johnson—to arm more of their fleet. Inasmuch as they wanted him to do so simply because he *could*, he had decided against it. But it was probably time to rethink that decision.

“Well, as I said before,” Peckard said, trying to cheer up the table, “there won’t be an attack anytime soon. And Mr. Feynman’s *ingenious* legal maneuvers will probably get the U.S. occupation forces off of Lotos in a very diplomatic way.”

Edward Feynman smiled. He himself hadn’t realized the pleasant side effect of his negotiations with Lugar until after the deal was done.

“Real estate prices are now almost as high in Lotos as they are here in Minerva,” Peckard explained. “My guess is that within the next five years, the Marines won’t be able to *afford* their occupation. Granted, they’ll undoubtedly station a carrier nearby, but I cannot stress how much the Lotosian coup has helped us.”

“So what’s the plan, then?” Ribald asked, becoming impatient. “We just fire our traitors, then sit back and let the problem fix itself?”

“Not exactly,” Peckard said. If nothing else, the blue collar types got to the point. “We need to make sure that the United States and any other imperialist powers realize that a war against Minerva would be prohibitively costly. As the entire world now knows, any *ground* assault would be disastrous; no army will ever take the island.”

“But that still leaves air and sea,” Ribald objected.

“True enough,” Peckard admitted. “And to that end, I personally have already taken some timid steps. Over the past two years, I’ve invested a few million doll—several thousand ounces in R&D for surface-to-air missiles, antiship cruise missiles, coastal mines, and so on. In conjunction with Mr. Maynard,” Peckard paused to nod at the CEO of GemStar, the industry leader, “we’ve even deployed a few prototypes of reconnaissance and combat satellites.”

“Gentlemen, please relax,” Feynman interjected as the murmurs grew louder. “I have worked closely with Mr. Peckard at each step of the way, to ensure that all of this is perfectly legal.”

“As I said,” Peckard resumed, “what we have accomplished so far is rather preliminary. In order to mount a true deterrent to a U.N. coalition, we will need to invest hundreds of millions of ounces over the next decade.”

The murmurs returned. “I just laid off fifty people.” “Are my *competitors* investing in missiles?” “How do we even know what we’re buying?” “I suppose *you* will oversee the investments?”

“Gentlemen,” Peckard said, holding up his hands. “We’re not asking you for contributions.” The murmurs died down again. “But at least now we all understand the situation. At this point, I’ll turn it over to Mr. Kraft.”

The Carecoe executive nodded.

“Working with Mr. Feynman’s firm,” Kraft began, “Carecoe and Prudence have developed a new type of insurance policy, designed specifically to indemnify the holders against losses sustained as a result of foreign military attack. As our existing policies expire, we will gradually phase them out so that our companies are *not* liable for such losses unless the new policies are purchased. Consequently, we will be able to isolate the specific monetary damages foreign militaries threaten us with, and we will charge our customers accordingly.” Kraft paused to let the men grasp the idea.

“What this means,” he continued, “is that we will also know how much *preventive* or *defensive* measures are worth, in terms of gold ounces. So for example,” Kraft said, looking at Skinner, “if the Barons recruit a few fighter pilots, and patrol Minervan air space, our company will gladly reimburse your efforts, since this type of investment will

more than pay for itself in lower compensation claims from our customers. The same idea applies to the arming of merchantmen,” Kraft said, now looking at Brady.

“It may not take off for a few years,” Kraft said, “but once the West becomes openly belligerent, Carecoe and Prudence will be taking in millions in premiums on military policies. There is currently a huge, virtually untapped market for security. I believe we can supply that market. All we need is public awareness of the danger, and some expert consultants. If we all work together, we can prevent another war.”

“And make ourselves a little richer in the process,” Peckard added with a chuckle. “What could be wrong with that?”

## Twenty-Two

Mason looked around the glorious apartment. Tara had originally wanted an actual house, but O'Toole had convinced her that it would be too extravagant. Instead, they had purchased three consecutive floors near the top of the Trump Tower. The middle floor had been removed, and the near-cube had been completely renovated to form a luxurious loft, enclosed on all sides by windows offering a view of the entire island. The O'Tooles' home had been featured in countless articles and television spots.

Tara emerged from the upstairs room, and softly padded down the winding staircase. Mason could barely make eye contact.

"It's okay David," Tara said softly. "It wasn't your fault. And Danny's fine."

"You feel better, tiger?" O'Toole asked. Danny nodded, his head still buried in O'Toole's shirt.

"Now Danny, I want you to listen to me," O'Toole said. He gently pushed his son's shoulders and tilted his head up to face his own. Danny wiped his snot-filled nose with an arm.

"Everything turned out O.K. today, and your mother and I are very glad that no one was hurt. But next time, if you ever find yourself in that situation, *give up your money*. Don't ever fight someone over something as stupid as your wallet. As you get older, you'll see that the easiest thing in the world is making money. All you need to do is open your eyes, and you'll see nine different ways to become rich. But if someone hurts you, or worse, no amount of money can take that back."

Danny nodded his head, but then burst back into tears. O'Toole let him bury his head once again in his father's soiled shirt.

Especially in light of the day's events, O'Toole was more confident than ever in his position regarding the family's money: O'Toole felt that they should donate the great bulk of it, and *publicly*. Especially if Danny ended up going abroad to study, O'Toole felt it was imperative to eliminate the appeal to kidnappers.

Tara would never allow the type of security that would ease O'Toole's mind; she believed, probably rightly, that a boy shouldn't be surrounded by bodyguards while growing up. The only solution, to which Tara hadn't yet agreed but would probably now come around to, was for the O'Tooles to give away their wealth. Once they had done that, perhaps O'Toole could sleep peacefully. He would even have the homing chip removed from Danny's arm, hopefully without Tara ever realizing it had been there in the first place.

"I don't know why you would think that, David," Tara said in response to Mason's concerns. "Yes, I disagree with you on just about everything, but I certainly *respect* you. I wouldn't leave Danny with you otherwise."

"Oh," Mason said, stunned. "I suppose I just thought that you viewed me as...crazy."

"Why?"

"Well, your review of my book..."

"Oh, *that?*" Tara said with a laugh. "David, I was still in college! I knew before I even opened it that I was going to trash your novel. But in the grand scheme of things, it was a wonderful book."

"Really?" Mason asked.

"Of course. You have a lovely mind, David. I couldn't write the sorts of things that you do. Not that I'd necessarily *want* to, mind you."

"Well, I never realized that," Mason admitted. "You know, I feel the same way about your work. I couldn't write the way you do, and often I wish I could."

"Oh David," Tara said, "I don't need a *quid pro quo*. I know you're above gossip columns."

"I'm not talking about your recent work," Mason said, without irony. "Back when you wrote for the *Verdict*. That was genuinely brilliant writing."

Tara blushed.

"And I must tell you," Mason continued, "the most amazing play I have ever seen, was a low-budget production in the Village, and written by a young Tara McClare."

"Which one?" Tara asked.



“I don’t remember the name, but it concerned the crucifixion of Jesus.”

“Oh, *Trial by Jury*,” Tara said and nodded.

“Yes,” Mason recalled. “It was unbelievably bold, the way you tricked the audience. At the climax, I looked around me, and just about everyone was shouting, ‘Crucify him!’ at the top of his lungs. And they weren’t only shouting it...they were really *angry* at the arrogant man. They wanted him to *pay* for his self-righteousness. I’ve never seen anything like it.”

\* \* \*

“Again, I cannot express to you how sorry I am for this,” Mason said as they waited for the elevator.

“David, it’s okay,” O’Toole reassured him. “Say, anyone know what time it is? Oh! You’ve got a watch.”

Mason smiled. O’Toole was a genuinely decent human being.

After he had seen Mason off, O’Toole returned to the kitchen where Tara was brewing tea.

“Guess what?” she asked.

“What?”

“David said that he thought one of my college plays was the most amazing one he’d ever seen.” As she said this, Tara didn’t even look at her husband. Instead, she stared off into the distant ocean.

“No kidding,” O’Toole answered. “I’m going to check on Danny.”

O’Toole tried not to sulk as he climbed the stairs. He constantly praised Tara’s work, yet she had always pooh poohed his compliments and pointed out the flaws in whatever she had written. O’Toole had always thought this was because Tara was a perfectionist, but now he realized it was simply that she didn’t consider him a very good judge of talent.

## Twenty-Three

“Gretchen, another round of drinks...for all my friends,” Matt said, doing a decent impression of Mickey Rourke from *Barfly*.

The others at the table—as well as the poor waitress, no doubt—were relieved that he had, apparently, finally dropped the jokes concerning fairy tales from the brothers Grimm. Matt always felt the need to dwell on any female server’s name, in order to (a) appear as if he really cared about the girl, but more important (b) drive home the name in his own head. In his present state of inebriation, Matt could come up with nothing clever to say regarding *Gretchen*, and so instead exploited its weak similarity to *Gretel*.

“King, isn’t it about time for you to take another piss?” Chris Nook inquired. “I mean, *I* just pounded a beer, so I bet your bladder has the heebie jeebies.”

“No,” Matt said, after a moment’s reflection, “but I just pounded your mom, and my *dick* has the heebie jeebies.”

Matt took a large sip, and accidentally made eye contact with the young blonde who had been staring at him for the last forty-five minutes. She was far from attractive, and the two other porkers at the table were even worse. The fourth member of their table was a small, unassuming guy, probably the blonde’s boyfriend.

Seizing upon the spurious invitation, the blonde stood up and began walking toward the table.

“Oh shit,” Matt groaned. “Okay everybody, make like we’re in suspended animation.”

“Now let her down gentle,” Jim insisted.

“Of course,” Matt said in astonishment. “What sort of prick do you think I am?”

“Um, sorry to interrupt,” the blonde said. She had halted her approach a full five feet from their table. “But my friend over there thinks you’re cute.”

Matt simply could not help it. What the fuck could you expect with *that* opening??

“Well that’s ironic, cuz I hear that *that* guy over there likes his women like he likes his bakeries.”

“Wh-what?” the blonde asked.

“Full of rolls,” Matt explained, finishing his beer. He really did need to piss.

“Um,” the blonde persisted, obviously emboldened by the alcohol, “she wants you to go talk to her. I think you’d really like her.”

“What, does she have a gap in her teeth?” Matt inquired.

Apparently, Matt had been unsuccessful in filtering the sarcasm from his tone; at this point, even the blonde suspected foul play.

“You’re just really an asshole, aren’t you?” she suddenly demanded. “You could’ve just said you weren’t interested, but instead you have to sit there and try to make me feel like shit.”

““Try?”” Matt objected. “And anyway honey, all I’m doing is one-tenth of what you bitches pull all the time.”

At this point, Jim and Quinn were looking away from the confrontation. Nook was thoroughly enjoying it.

“You think just because you’re good-looking, you can treat people like shit.” The blonde paused, searching for a succinct illustration of the invalidity of this strategy. “But you can’t.”

“Oh boo hoo,” Matt responded. “Honey, the only reason *you’re* nice is that you weren’t graced with a set of killer tits and a tight ass. You’re pretty ugly, so that’s why you’re pretty nice. You have to be for anyone to associate with you.”

The blonde did not answer for a few moments, although it was clear that she did not fully endorse Matt’s claims.

“Fuck *you!*” she yelled, stomping her foot. A few people at the bar turned to watch the discussion.

“All right,” Matt said, feeling the growing urgency in his bladder. “Hey pal,” he called out to the boyfriend, “you wanna curb your dog?”

\* \* \*

“Bullshit,” Matt said, “that would never work. There must be more to the story.”

“That’s what Tara told me,” Quinn responded. “I agree, you’d have to be crazy to try it, but I suppose it could work. That kid didn’t have time to think it through; it just happened.”

Quinn had just related the implausible events surrounding the attempted mugging. (As he often did when drinking, Quinn had called Tara.)

Several moments passed, while the men—now heavily drunk—pondered the tale.

“Okay, I’ve decided,” Quinn suddenly announced.

“You’re going through with the vasectomy?” Matt asked.

“I’m definitely buying the ship,” Quinn continued, ignoring Matt. “I’ve been talking with that guy I mentioned, and it looks simple enough. They tell you where to load up, and they tell you what route to take. When you get to Minerva, they unload it for you and pay you in gold. All you do is bear the risk.”

“What sort of risk are we talking about?” Jim asked.

“Well, apparently ninety-five percent of the ships that head for Minerva get through. But that counts everybody, even the independent guys who aren’t hooked up to the satellites. And a lot of them also have older ships.”

“What about the people with new ships, who *are* hooked up to the satellites?” Matt asked. This didn’t sound like such a stupid idea after all. It was just glorified drug dealing, really.

“Well,” Quinn said, with skepticism, “my guy claims that only one ship with the proper equipment has been caught. And my guy says it was the captain’s error. To hear my guy talk, it’s the easiest thing in the world to steer a boat clear of the Navy ships, if you’ve got an ocean to work with and you know exactly where all the ships are.”

“You’ll definitely need to check those figures out,” Jim warned.

“Of course,” Quinn agreed. “But, assuming it all looks good, what do you guys think?”

“Arrr,” Nook said, affecting a pirate accent. “First Mate Nook reportin’ fer duty, Captain Red Beard.” Nook had resurrected Quinn’s old nickname, from the days when he had been dating Tara.

“Arrr,” Matt said without missing a beat. “Me rank is Seaman, and I search the seven seas for young boys to add to me crew.”

“Arrr,” Nook responded, trying not to laugh. “Seaman King, load the aft torpedo tubes!”

Quinn looked at Jim, who shook his head sadly.

## Twenty-Four

“...but to answer your question,” Alex Maynard, CEO of GemStar, said to George Ribald, “yes, we have redundant firepower. Even if the U.S. were to launch a preemptive strike on our killer sats, we would still retain enough retaliatory force to take them all out.”

“And how long for you to achieve space superiority?” Ribald pressed.

“Well, it depends what you mean,” Maynard responded. “With our jamming birds, we expect to totally knock out coalition communications within five minutes. But depending on the time of day, it might take us anywhere from several hours to over a day to actually destroy the hardware in question.”

“I still say this is crazy,” Tom Brady said, already knowing that his protests were pointless. “The U.S. didn’t need satellites to nuke Hiroshima.”

“Oh come now, Mr. Brady,” Edward Feynman said. “The coalition wouldn’t *dare* use nuclear weapons in response. We’ve got a solid thirty-percent of the First World agreeing that the blockade is inhumane. We can’t be faulted for taking steps to import food for our children.”

“Your PR teams can spin it however they want,” Brady said. “The fact is, we will fire the first shots. No matter what happens from that point on, this will be the war that *we* started.”

“And what of it?” Peckard asked, finally returning to the discussion. “It doesn’t matter who starts the war; what matters is who finishes it.”

Brady didn’t bother replying; he merely shook his head and left the room. Brady knew that he would be outvoted by a large margin; his abstention meant nothing at this point.

As he paced in the observation room outside, Brady wondered how it had come to this. Each step of the way, he had taken what he thought the prudent course of action. When Peckard had formed the Defense Trust two years previously, it seemed perfectly sensible. Brady had become aware, just as the others had, that their loose arrangement didn’t make economic sense; certain obvious expenditures weren’t undertaken, simply

because the relevant party didn't stand to profit from it. In that light, when Peckard and his carrion, Feynman, had proposed the Trust, they sold it as a mere accounting gimmick to pool their assets and share the benefits of their collective defense spending. It was supposed to be just an extension of the non-binding arrangements with Carecoe and Prudence.

But once the coalition forces stepped up their blockade, Peckard's attitude began to change. He was no longer content with deterrence; he started running computer simulations of missile strikes on the U.S. and British vessels. For some reason, Peckard no longer wanted to rely on ever faster blockade runners, and more sophisticated tracking of coalition ships. No, now it seemed all Peckard wanted to do was *attack*.

Unfortunately, there wasn't much Brady could do about it: He was contractually locked in to the Trust for seven years, and most of the other voters were sheep who would follow Peckard's lead.

\* \* \*

"Yes, that's right," Maynard said. "It's a pity Mr. Brady had to leave us, because he could offer some insight as well. But suffice it to say, we will have plenty of oil tankers ready to steam in the moment the blockade has been broken."

"This might be stupid," Paul Kennedy said, raising his right arm but only lifting his index finger, "but how would our space attack look from a legal angle? I mean, can we be *sued*?"

"That's an excellent question, Mr. Kennedy." Feynman rose from his chair. "Yes, the U.S. federal government, just to take an example, has legal standing in Minervan courts, and the Pentagon satellites are its recognized property. So if and when the Trust's satellites destroy them, the Trust will be liable for that damage.

"However," Feynman continued, "the U.S. federal government is *also* liable for the hundreds of ships, including their cargo, that its naval vessels have impounded. Right now there are thousands of merchants who have actionable claims against the U.S. government. Of course, most haven't bothered to launch legal proceedings, since there's little hope for compensation. So what the Trust will do, if it comes to it, is buy up claims

at a fraction of their face value, until we have more than enough to cover the monetary damages from our attack. In this way, there'll be no question that the Trust's actions are perfectly legal."

"And now gentlemen," Peckard said, sensing that there were no further questions, "the most important part: How does the Trust make a fortune from all of this?"

The room chuckled.

"Assuming that everyone here keeps his mouth shut, we will be in the quite fortuitous position of being the only people to know precisely *when* the blockade will be disrupted. Consequently, the Trust will invest a large fraction of its assets in put options on commodities such as oil and livestock. And, just as I personally did during the Lotosian conflict, the Trust will also invest heavily in real estate calls. Naturally we'll diversify our holdings across a spectrum of relevant commodities, and of course we won't make ourselves *too* reliant on the timing in case something comes up, but..."

Peckard paused and swept the room with a grin.

"...I expect the Defense Trust will have a very, very profitable quarter."



## Twenty-Five

“Are you sure you want to do that?” Mason asked Danny.

“You said I should control the center of the board,” Danny answered, being careful to keep his finger on his Knight.

“Yes, but I also said you should keep your extended pieces protected,” Mason reminded him. “That Knight is guarding your Bishop. Do you intend to remedy that with your next move? Don’t forget about him.”

“Whatever,” Danny said, looking hopeless. He moved his Knight back. “What should I do?”

“It’s *your* move, Daniel,” Mason snapped, “so *you* must decide!”

Danny moved his Rook, placing it in the path of Mason’s Knight.

“Fine,” Mason sighed, “if you don’t want to play, we can stop. But...look at me, Daniel,” Mason commanded.

Danny looked at Mason.

“...but don’t for one minute feel sorry for yourself. You lost because you made inferior moves, and you did that because you didn’t think them through. It doesn’t matter how much older I am, Daniel. My pieces follow the same rules as yours, and I’m starting down a Rook. You have the ability to beat me, Daniel. But you never will until you believe it.”

“Yes sir,” Danny mumbled. “I have to get ready for bed now.”

\* \* \*

“Why do you always go there?” Danny asked.

“Because it’s the only place we can all agree on,” Tara answered. “There’s gambling for Dr. Mason and the guys, and entertainers for your father and me.”

“Can you tell me a story before you go?” Danny risked.

“Aren’t you getting old for stories from mommy?” Tara said, smiling.

“No,” Danny said, his mind racing. “I want to hear a Tara O’Toole story. Even grownups like her stories.”

“Okay,” Tara said. “Get in bed.”

Tara lied on top of the covers after Danny settled himself. She was pressed for time, and so returned to a tested formula.

“It was a dark, stormy night, and Scientist Blue had just made a discovery,” Tara began. She saw Danny smile with anticipation.

“Scientist Blue had finally perfected his elixir,” Tara continued. “It would almost instantly dissolve bullets and heal gunshot wounds. The war with the Reds was causing terrible casualties, with hundreds of Blue soldiers dying every day. So Scientist Blue took his formula and rushed over to notify Major Blue.

“When he arrived at his office, Scientist Blue told Major Blue about his discovery. But the Major got angry. ‘Dammit Scientist,’ he yelled, ‘We paid you to work on the laser cannon!’

“‘But my elixir can save thousands of our troops!’ the Scientist protested. ‘If we mass produce it, we can win the war!’

“‘Don’t tell me how to win the war,’ the Major yelled. ‘And what good are our troops if they’re still using bullets when the Reds have laser beams? I’d trade 10,000 boys for one laser cannon any day. Besides, you don’t even know if that stuff works.’

“‘But of course I do!’ the Scientist pleaded. ‘I’ve tested it on primates of all kinds. If you give me the word, we can start treating the wounded in the hospitals.’

“‘Are you crazy, Scientist?’ the Major yelled. ‘Do you really think I’m gonna let you experiment on my boys, who are out there fighting every day, with your monkey juice?’”

\* \* \*

“Hey, is Jennifer Heyden working tonight?” Matt asked the pit boss. Regardless of the answer, he could still ask every other hot employee he encountered. It was a great way to break the ice.

“No, I think she’s in tomorrow,” the man answered as he took down Mason’s information. He had no idea who Jennifer Heyden was.

“Damn,” Matt responded. “If I’m gonna lose another twenty ounces, I at least want some great jerk-off material.”

“Better luck next time,” the pit boss said, before walking away. The money was certainly better on the island, but the crowds were even raunchier than in Vegas.

\* \* \*

“So it was easy?” O’Toole asked.

“Piece a cake,” Quinn answered. “It was like buying into a franchise: we make a down payment, they give us the ship and cargo, give us a training session, and tell us where to take it. We got there with no trouble at all—didn’t even *see* a U.S. or British ship—they unloaded the stuff, and filled us back up for the return voyage. We just need to make one more roundtrip, and the boat’s ours. After that, we keep all the profits.”

“You pay for the satellite feed?” O’Toole asked.

“Oh, right, we pay for that. But that’s just a cost of doing business, what with the blockade. It’s like paying for fuel.”

“Sure,” O’Toole said, nodding. “Look, if you don’t mind me asking, how experienced are you at sea?”

“Oh me?” Quinn said and laughed. “I’m not much of a sailor. But I picked up two extra guys. Both served in the Navy, or maybe the Coast Guard. So they know what they’re doing.”

“And how many of these trips do you plan on making?” O’Toole asked.

“Well,” Quinn said, leaning back in his chair, “we were playing around with numbers just the other night. I figure if we make another three roundtrips, we can sell the ship and all retire as very, very wealthy men.”

“Do you know there’s another carrier coming?” O’Toole asked. “And the Europeans are really beefing up their domestic interdiction; you could get picked up just trying to load your cargo. How well do you know the people telling you where to go?”

“Well,” Quinn said, “I don’t really know them at all. But I hardly think they’d give us this brand new ship—you gotta see this thing, it’s a beaut—and then hand us over to the French police. Besides, we’re not going to Europe at all.”

“Oh no?” O’Toole said.

“Nope,” Quinn answered. “I’d tell you where, but I don’t want to compromise security and all.”

O’Toole snorted and finished his beer. Quinn just stared at Tara’s husband.

*He sure doesn’t like the idea of another self-made man coming along,* Quinn thought.

\* \* \*

*Oh don’t hit you stupid motherfucker...*

Matt watched with horror as the man in the Sonics jersey hit his thirteen while the dealer showed a Four of Diamonds. The dealer placed a Ten of Clubs on the man’s hand and took his chips.

“Good job, chief,” Matt groaned. “Wouldn’t want to miss out on the suspense.”

Matt slid out the chips to double down on his initial twenty-ounce wager. He had been dealt an eleven.

“Oh someone sodomize me now,” Matt said as the dealer placed a Five of Hearts on his hand.

Mason stayed on his seventeen. The dealer flipped a Seven of Spades.

“Great, fuck me with a *black* cock why don’t you,” Matt mumbled.

The dealer drew a Two of Diamonds from the shoe.

*Oh baby oh baby oh baby,* Matt thought. He had lifted his butt from the seat without realizing it.

The dealer drew a Seven of Hearts. Matt sat back down.

“Th-it th-it th-it that’s all folks,” he said and stormed away from the table. He headed for the bar.

Moments later, Mason joined him.

“Matthew,” he said, “I told you to reduce your bet size. The percentage of your bankroll was far too high.”

“Yeah,” Matt agreed. “Note to self: Next time, cut your bets in half, and fuck yourself for twice as long.”

Mason sipped from his martini.

“I can’t *believe* that stupid fuck,” Matt said. “I’d have eighty ounces right now if it weren’t for that dumb prick.”

“Oh come now, Matthew,” Mason said. “The man was a fool, to be sure, but you can’t blame your failure on others—at least not in Blackjack.”

“Oh boy,” Matt said. “Now you’ll tell me that guy did me a favor, right? Like, if it weren’t for him, I’d be down eighty ounces *plus* my balls would shrivel.”

“Matthew,” Mason said firmly, “you have a fine mind and it breaks my heart to see you waste it.”

Matt suppressed his sulk.

“A foolish player ahead of you is just as likely to help as to hurt you,” Mason explained. “If the two top cards of the shoe had been reversed, his play would have saved you. But I daresay you wouldn’t have remembered that nearly as much as you’ll remember tonight’s incident.”

“Guess we’ll never know,” Matt said, “since that guy certainly fucked me. But I’ll be sure to think back fondly on the prompt bartender.”

\* \* \*

“How’d ya do, Cap’n?” Matt asked Quinn as he and Mason approached the others at the designated time.

“I dropped about five quarters at the tables, and another at the bar,” Quinn answered. “You?”

“Oh, you know,” Matt said bitterly, “I was up eighteen at one point—and I’m talking full *ounces* here, not quarters—and walked out down sixty-two.”

“Ouch,” Jim said, “you *are* stupid.”

“So I guess I’m definitely in for the next ocean jaunt,” Matt said, sitting down next to Tara on the bench.

“What about you, beautiful?” he asked. “Find any replacements for the wind-up husband?”

“No,” Tara said, “but I’m still looking.”

Everyone stood up as the ferry approached the floating casino.

\* \* \*

“Aww, there’s no place like home,” Matt said, staring at the advertisement hanging on the subway station wall. Two women were drinking beer that two men were pouring over the chest of a third, topless woman. The ad read, “BRAMMS: GOES DOWN SMOOTH.”

“That’s just great,” Tara said. “I’m glad to see exploitation is alive and well in Minerva.”

“I hope you are referring to the drinkers who may be misled into preferring beer over martinis,” Mason said. “Those women are certainly being paid quite well for their pose. And notice that their faces are hidden, so they needn’t squirm in church.”

*Here we go,* O’Toole thought.

“You never cease to amaze, good Doctor,” Tara said. “The ad shows us that women are only important for their boobs, and that, to you, is proof of the company’s decency.”

“What else are women important for?” Matt asked Quinn, keeping his voice low so as not to disturb the professor.

“Oh Tara,” Mason sighed, “now you’re just behaving as a red-headed cliché. You certainly have the ability to discredit male chauvinists, but for some inexplicable reason you choose to prove their point.”

The argument was interrupted by the approaching subway. Unlike systems in other cities, the subway cars in Minerva were actually linked together in giant, elongated rings, one for each line. When the ring for, say, the local B line moved, that meant every car on the line moved with it. In consequence, the timetables were incredibly accurate.

The rings were arranged concentrically, with the express lines in the interior. The ring on an express line would move through roughly ten percent of its perimeter in between each stop, while the outer, local rings would stop every fifty meters or so. By wisely choosing lines, a passenger could usually reach any ground location on the island within fifteen minutes. Also in contrast to most cities, the subways in Minerva were clean and comfortable, so that even its wealthiest couple would ride them, rather than cutting short an evening out with friends who did not normally take helicopters home.

“Can you honestly sit there,” Tara said, after everyone had been seated on the plush benches, “and tell me that society doesn’t exploit women?”

“It would depend,” Mason answered, “on your definition of *exploit*. But I will say that whatever ‘exploitation’ is suffered by women, is suffered much worse by men.”

“Ha!” Tara exclaimed. Surely David was just putting on a show for the crowd at this point.

“Amen!” Matt yelled. “Preach it brotha!”

“Please specify your complaints, Mrs. O’Toole,” Mason challenged.

“Where to begin?” Tara said. “How about the fact that from the moment they’re born, girls are given Barbie dolls and anorexic role models? If a girl doesn’t have an anatomically impossible figure, she feels guilty just eating.”

“Fair enough,” Mason said. “But the male role models are *truly* impossible to emulate. Little girls play with Barbie dolls, but little boys play with Superman dolls; I daresay the latter sets a more formidable standard.”

“Oh please,” Tara said, “everyone knows that Superman is a fantasy. But girls are led to believe that they can really look like the women in swimsuit magazines if they just diet and exercise enough.”

“But they *can*!” Mason exclaimed. “The *models* are able to look like the models, are they not?”

Matt laughed out loud at this point.

“I must confess,” Mason said, “that the feminist whining on this matter disgusts me. Can you imagine a man complaining that professional football is an exploitive institution, and that all-star athletes should quit because their achievements hurt his self-esteem? Can you possibly *imagine* a man making that argument?”

“That’s right David,” Tara said, “ignore the issue by making an analogy. Just pretend that there really aren’t girls dying from eating disorders.”

“Pardon me while I sob,” Mason said. “Mrs. O’Toole, ‘society’ also ‘expects’ young men to march blindly into machine gun nests whenever political rulers tell them to. ‘Society’ ‘tells them’ that if they don’t, they’re cowards and sexually undesirable. So what happens? Every year thousands if not millions of young men are butchered in wars caused by evil politicians. So you’ll forgive me if I don’t shed a tear for the depressed sorority girl who puts a finger down her throat.”

The group remained silent for a few moments. They had never seen Mason become so emotional during an argument.

O’Toole noticed three people at the other end of the subway car. They were stealing glances at O’Toole and Tara. O’Toole realized that they had recognized the couple.

This recognition was becoming a growing problem. O’Toole had been approached three out of the last four times he had left the apartment. Especially in bars and restaurants, people were constantly thanking him and asking for his autograph. O’Toole suspected that tonight’s relative peace was only due to the imposing presence of Quinn and Knight, whom the masses had no doubt mistaken for surly bodyguards.

*I’ve got to do something about this,* O’Toole thought, and surveyed the rest of his group. Matt was resting his head on his knees, while the others stared out the window, eyes glazed over with drowsiness. O’Toole seemed to be the only one aware of the now gawking fans.



## Twenty-Six

Vice President Anthony Black tried to conceal his disgust as he surveyed the room. This was the first time he'd met with this particular group of incompetent, overpromoted kiss-asses, and the circumstances were not pleasant. With Carson gaining in the polls, Lympman couldn't miss his photo ops in California. Consequently, Black had to endure the briefing with the "experts" on Minerva.

The attack needed to be handled delicately; done right, it could be turned to their advantage. But it could just as easily blow up in their faces in November. Initially, the plan had been to let Adams split the Republicans, drawing the votes from all the militia nuts and Bible thumpers, leaving Carson with only the moderates. But now that the crazy bastards had launched an attack, it would definitely provoke a backlash against Adams, whose campaign was literally financed (and this would certainly be leaked by the Carson campaign) by right-wing extremists from the island.

The first priority, of course, was to firmly place the blame on Greene. It had been *Republicans* who sold out the piss-poor natives to big business; that's how the catastrophe got started in the first place. Nonetheless, the voters were nothing if not forgetful: there were plenty of people who would vote against an incumbent just because the country had been attacked during his watch.

"So what are you telling me, General?" Black interrupted. "We can't do *anything* for two months?"

"Well," Riggs said, a bit flustered, "I wouldn't put it like *that*, Mr. Vice President. My men are working *furiously* to revamp our systems—"

"Right right, because the Tomahawks are supposed to be satellite-guided," Black interrupted yet again. "Can we just lob a few over there anyway, in the meantime?"

As Democrats, the president and Black had to take great pains to appear strong on national security. The voters would give a Nixon or a Reagan time to develop a proper counterattack, but not the current administration.

“Well,” Riggs said, afraid of another interruption, “we certainly *could*, but we’d be just as likely to hit a hospital as an airfield. I’m not sure how that would play on the BBC.”

Holy *shit* did Black hate generals!

“Thank you for the extemporaneous analysis, General Riggs, but the way these things work, you answer my technical questions, and I and the president will worry about the media.”

Black took a moment to think. Riggs was right; the only thing possibly worse than doing nothing was to kill a bunch of school kids with an errant bomb.

Black decided that this situation was serious. The last thing in the world he needed was to inherit a war in his own first term. He therefore had to start from scratch, and truly understand the situation. And *that* meant challenging the corner into which the Pentagon wizards had painted themselves.

“Let’s back up a moment,” Black finally said. “I understand why we don’t just land Marines...these sadists aren’t afraid to blow off teenagers’ kneecaps. And yes, General Riggs, that wouldn’t look good on the 6 o’clock news.

“But we’re talking about two tiny islands, right? Can’t we just set up a perimeter of ships and starve them out?”

Black was getting excited about his idea; it would be like a medieval siege.

“Well, that’s basically what we *have* been doing, Mr. Vice President.” Riggs chose his words carefully. “But the islands actually have fairly sophisticated submarines and missile systems. We’ve reached a sort of equilibrium with them, where we don’t press too close, and they don’t interfere when we seize a merchant ship.”

“So what you’re saying,” Black summarized, “is that the diameter of our perimeter is really big, and what should be a blockade is really a sieve?”

“Yes,” Riggs answered.

“How many people are on these islands?” Black asked after a moment of thought.

Riggs opened his mouth but did not speak.

“For permanent residents on both Minerva and Lotos,” Ryan Miller volunteered, “our best guess is 1,370,000. But now that the aerial and naval blockade has been

disrupted, the actual number of people on the islands at any one time will be significantly higher, since there are hundreds of thousands who ‘commute’ to work there.”

“Okay,” Black said, thinking. “So now can you please tell me,” Black asked Miller, “why we’re having so much trouble? If I’m not mistaken, San Diego has more people. And it seems to me that the U.S. military could handle San Diego without a crisis.”

“With all due respect, Mr. Vice President,” Miller answered, “that’s not the best comparison. Minerva is not a typical city. To give you a simple example, they don’t have any mechanism for combating inflation. So speculators can drive the price of essential items up during a blockade, and there are no laws to stop this. Now, it may not be good for their economy as a whole, but it definitely keeps thousands of smugglers around the word risking their lives to supply the islands. With any other country, General Riggs’ blockade would have brought them to their knees months ago.”

“That’s right,” Riggs said. This Miller wasn’t so naïve after all.

“Keep talking,” Black said.

“We can’t freeze their assets, since they rival New York as a banking center. You also need to remember that the majority of Minerva’s exports are electronic in nature: software, financial services, data storage and processing. Since they control the satellites, we can’t stop them from earning foreign exchange to pay for their black market imports.”

“Okay,” Black said. “So they have inflation and pesos. That doesn’t tell me why our Navy doesn’t move in.”

Miller paused for a moment to let Riggs answer, but saw that the vice president was still looking squarely at him.

“Well,” Miller began, “it’s my understanding that the Minervan fighter jets are equipped with superior air-to-air missiles. It’s not clear how our Navy fighters would fare in a dogfight situation. Up till now, our ships and patrol aircraft have respected a 200-kilometer radius from the islands. Their own defensive patrols, as well as informal communications with us, suggest that, at least for now, the Minervans are content to give us that. We have reason to believe, though, that they would retaliate with force if we pressed much harder.”

“Fine,” Black said, “so we keep 200 kilometers away. How many miles is that?” he asked.

“Around 125,” someone answered.

“Okay,” Black continued, “so we keep our boys 125 miles off the coast. I still don’t see why we don’t surround them and starve them.”

“It’s a question of resources, Mr. Vice President,” Riggs said. Black continued to look at Miller.

“What the general is referring to,” Miller explained, “is that there’s a lot of ocean to cover. Since the smugglers are generally using ships faster than our frigates, we actually have to set up a perimeter around 150 miles out, in order to give ourselves room to stop a runner when we spot him. So right there, that’s almost a thousand miles to cover. We’ve currently got two carrier groups, one on the east and one on the west side of the island. But again, you have to understand the tremendous advantage their control of the satellites gives them. They can watch our ships and patrol planes in real time. Even when we stop a ship, there are fifteen others slipping through the gaps created when we converge.”

“And why is it,” Black inquired, “that smugglers have faster ships than the United States Navy?”

“They’re not *all* faster,” Riggs offered. “But over the years they’ve gotten much better. And they don’t load them down, either. They’ll send a dozen ships with light cargo rather than a standard merchantman.”

Black thought.

“In light of the new developments, there will be no difficulty in sending more ships. What if we deployed two more carriers, General? Could you accomplish your mission *then*?”

“We would certainly intercept more vessels,” Riggs said. “I would like to think that the islanders would realize they were beaten, but who can say with people like this?”

“What do you think?” Black asked Miller. “Will squeezing harder do the trick?”

“Absolutely not,” Miller responded without hesitation. “They’d just shift to heavier air and submarine smuggling. In fact, even if we dispensed with boarding, and just sank blockade runners on sight, the island wouldn’t fall.”

“And why is that?” Black asked. He was glad the boy had brought up the hindrance of boarding and seizing the runners; that had been one of Black’s next questions.

“They’re largely self-sufficient in terms of necessities,” Miller said. “They’ve got huge seafood farms, plenty of desalination plants, and several nuclear reactors for power. They don’t have many cars, and virtually no heavy industry, so they don’t need much oil. I’ve already mentioned that what they produce, they only need electricity, computers, and their brains to make. They’re also incredibly wealthy and ingenious; whatever else they truly need, they’ll either pay to smuggle in, or they’ll invent a substitute.”

“Makes me wonder why we don’t all move there,” Black snorted. This Miller sounded more and more like he was infatuated with the enemy. Black had seen this sort of thing before, especially in the Bureau. Piss-broke agents would eavesdrop on mobsters for months, monitoring their spending habits and the starlets they screwed, and end up admiring them. It was disgusting.

“You mentioned submarines,” Black recalled. “Why don’t we send in twenty of them, have them surface off the coast, and take out their airfields?”

“Actually, Mr. Vice President,” Riggs answered, “their airfields are separate from the islands themselves. And we have every reason to believe they’re heavily protected by minefields as well as their own submarines.”

“Let me guess,” Black said, “their submarines are better than ours?”

“Broadly speaking,” Riggs said, obviously prepared to receive another insult, “no sir, they are not. But they do have sophisticated torpedo systems, and would be quite challenging in combat.”

“You seem to have all the answers,” Black said, again looking at Miller. “Please tell me why the United States Navy has to worry about the submarines of some piss-ant island. How much do we spend on our submarines?”

“That I can’t answer,” Miller said, “but you have to keep in mind, the *only thing* the Minervan subs need to do, is detect attacking subs and fire torpedoes at them. They don’t need to go on six-month patrols to the Middle East, or carry around ICBMs. It’s the same with their fighter jets. They’re not nearly as versatile as, say, an F-14, but they don’t need to be. All they have to do is get their missiles close enough to fire.”

“And how do we know all this about their weapon systems?” Black asked. He had grown quite suspicious of CIA “intelligence” during his career.

“Well, we looked at their manufacturers’ brochures,” Miller answered, trying not to chuckle. “There’s no secret as to *what* we’re up against; we just aren’t sure how *many* items they’ve purchased.”

“Well then,” Black said, “if you’re telling me their missiles and torpedoes are better than what we use now, why aren’t we buying from them? I suppose because their firms wouldn’t sell to the Pentagon?”

“Actually,” Miller answered, “it would certainly be possible to get any number of units, perhaps through somewhat roundabout channels. But the initial designs were made to be incompatible with Western platforms.”

“Plus,” Riggs said with a hesitant smile, “it would look bad, buying from the enemy.”

*And also there wouldn’t be any kickbacks or consulting spots for the generals,* Black thought. But the whole issue was moot, since Black doubted that the enemy equipment really was superior. He had learned that military planners were always full of reasons why something couldn’t be done.

“What about our base on the bigger island?” Black asked after a few moments of silence. “How many men do we have there?”

“We still maintain about 500 Marines there, for peacekeeping purposes,” Riggs answered.

“And nothing’s happened with them?”

“So far, nothing, Mr. Vice President. Of course they’ve been on high alert since the attack on our space-based resources, but, as I say, nothing has changed on the ground.”

“You’re supposed to be the expert on their ‘law’?” Black asked Miller, who nodded. “What would happen if we airlifted 50,000 troops onto the bigger island?”

“Well, where would you put them?” Miller asked. “There’s not room at the current facility. And when you say ‘airlift,’ do you mean booking a regular flight, with passengers who just happen to be soldiers? Or do you mean flying U.S. military planes in, without getting prior approval from their air traffic controllers?”

“I’m not sure what I mean,” Black snapped, “since I don’t understand how the fuck we got into this spot. Yesterday Lympman has me speaking to seniors, and today I’m supposed to figure out our response to a laser attack that nobody saw coming.”

The men squirmed as Black stared into space.

“Okay Miller,” he said, “let’s say we book plane tickets for our troops into the country. What happens?”

“Well, nothing, so long as they don’t have M-16s. Those aren’t acceptable carry-ons. But to answer your broader question, I don’t think anything would happen until our troops actually broke laws. Of course, if it came down to shooting, they’d be completely surrounded, and we couldn’t supply them.”

Black thought.

“What do you recommend we do?” he asked Miller.

“Condemn the attacks in the harshest possible terms, seek financial redress in the Minervan courts, and remind the world of the continued violation of U.N. resolutions. Wait a few months, then cite the hardships on the Minervan children as we phase out the blockade, limiting it only to weapons and narcotics.”

“That’s not going to happen,” Black informed Miller. “What’s your second recommendation?”

“Nuke them,” Miller said immediately. The men were startled.

“Oh?” Black said, a smile curling on his lips. Perhaps this Miller had some balls after all.

“It’s the same as playing at the casino,” Miller elaborated. “Given that you can’t win in the long run, and given that you have to play at all, then the only thing to do is bet it all on one hand.”

“And why can’t we win in the long run?” General Riggs demanded. It was true, they couldn’t win with their hands tied, but these piddly islands were a far cry from Normandy.

“What do you expect them to do?” Miller asked. “Do you really think all of their banks will volunteer customer records to the U.N.? Do you really think their laboratories will allow inspectors to walk in? Even if the public wanted it, there isn’t any group that *can* surrender.”

“Didn’t you miss the Lotosian fall?” Riggs pointed out.

“Yes, I failed to predict that,” Miller admitted.

Black sat back and thought. Now that he understood much better, he was intrigued by the whole situation.



## Twenty-Seven

“For someone who walked him into a mugging,” O’Toole said, smiling, “you’re one to talk.”

“Indeed,” Mason agreed, “but let us not use past mistakes to justify current ones. Peter,” Mason was quite serious now, “I fear for the future. This belligerence alarms me. Who can say what the United States will do in the next few years? You may never see your son again.”

“You worry too much,” O’Toole said. “And we both know that all Danny needs is a little worldly wisdom. Where better to get it than behind enemy lines?”

“And you’ll call me when you get to grandpa’s?” Tara insisted.

“Yes mom,” Dan answered. “I’ll have the pilot radio you too.”

“Oh my, aren’t you the confident world traveler,” Tara said. “Now I want you to be very careful over there. It’s not as safe as it is here on the island.”

“Yes mom,” Dan muttered.

Mason walked over. Tara once again checked that Danny’s bags had proper tags, then walked back to her husband to give the professor a private moment.

“Daniel,” Mason said, “you’ve read most of my books and listened to me pontificate your whole life. Now I want you to go over there and see it for yourself: life under the State.”

“Sure thing, Professor,” Dan said. “I’ll shoot an I.R.S. agent for you.”

“Good show,” Mason said. “Of course, you really can’t say things like that once you’re on the plane.”

“I *know*,” Dan said. Why did everyone think he was so stupid?

“Matt!” Dan suddenly yelled, looking over the crowd of bustling fliers.

“Ae-e-e-e, there ’e is!” Matt yelled and jogged up. As Tara had done before him, Mason walked away to give the two young men privacy.

“I thought you’d miss my flight,” Dan said.

“Well, I’ll be honest,” Matt said. “Last night, as I was orchestrating a daisy chain with these two girls from Spain I took home from the bar, I thought, ‘There’s no way in hell I’m gonna get up by 9 A.M.’ But, as it turns out, this morning I had to piss, and looking at those senioritas, I realized that the whole was definitely greater than the sum of the parts. So I told them I had to see my good buddy off to the States. I’ll tell you what, if I hadn’t gotten them out of my apartment quick-like, they could’ve broken a mirror or something.”

“Glad my quest for an education could assist you,” Dan said.

“So tell me Danny boy,” Matt said, “are you goin over there with a full cherry? I don’t mean to be crude, but we need to know what we’re dealing with here.”

“If you’re asking me—” Dan began, and hesitated.

“I’m saying, have you played hide the salami with a chick?”

“Strictly speaking, no.”

“Okay,” Matt said and thought. “Say—you’re not a fag, are you?”

“Hell no!” Dan protested.

“Whoa whoa whoa,” Matt said, holding up his hands, “easy there fella. There’s no shame in it. Seriously, if you like to smoke pole, just tell me now. I *will not* fault you for a taste in scrotum. But I don’t want to be sitting here, giving movie tickets to a blind man.”

“Screw you,” Dan said. “I’m not gay.”

“Okay, okay,” Matt agreed, “we’ve just gotta get you over that learning curve. First thing: Always remember that you’re going into a new place. Nobody there knows that you’ve been the strikeout king here in Minerva. So, leave all your psychological hang-ups on the island. Convince yourself that there are two Dan O’Tooles, the one on Minerva who can’t get laid, and the one in the States who bangs chicks like it’s his job.”

Dan nodded his head. He was listening far more intently to these pearls of wisdom than those offered by the professor.

“Second: If you ever feel intimidated by a girl, just remember: she is physically smaller and weaker than you, *and* she’s a lot more emotionally insecure. I guarantee you that ninety percent of the time when you think you’re bothering a girl, in reality, she’s worrying about how she looks or if she sounds stupid.

“Third: Do *not* let yourself fall into the trap of trying to outcompete guys for the prize girl. That is the complete, one hundred percent wrong approach. You need to let the prospective *girls* prove which ones are worthy enough to lick Dan O’Toole’s balls. Do you see the tremendous difference?”

\* \* \*

“...so when you get out there, you have to be aware of the different groups, your skaters, your punks, your wiggers...”

“What’s a wigger?” Dan asked.

“A white nigger,” Matt informed him. “You know, white kids who wear baggy pants and try to rap.”

“Oh,” Dan said. “What’s the word for a black kid who acts white?”

“A nigger,” Matt said after a moment of thought.

The lesson was cut short as O’Toole approached the pair. Matt deferred to the father by walking over to Tara, who was looking particularly sultry. Matt assumed it had to do with the whole protective mother thing.

“All set, buddy?” O’Toole asked.

Dan nodded.

“I’m not going to bore you with a bunch of tips,” O’Toole said, “and anyway, I think the good Mr. King has already done enough.”

Dan laughed.

“But I’d please like you to remember this: No one in this world will believe that integrity works, unless someone gives them a living example. As long as you stay true to your own personal code, you will never regret a single day in your life.”

Dan nodded and picked up his suitcase. He shook his father’s hand and headed for the gate.

“He’s so young,” Tara said as her son walked out of view.

“That boy is going to do something big,” O’Toole said.

As he watched his son leave for boarding school, Peter O’Toole’s arms filled with goosebumps, while a soothing warmth spread throughout his insides.

## PART IV

## Twenty-Eight

Lamas Bordak ran through the department store, knocking over racks of clothes. The siren had been wailing for a full thirty seconds, and she still hadn't found her six-year-old.

"Midi! Midi!"

Lamas finally spotted her son crouched in a corner, sitting on the floor and hugging his knees to his chest.

"[Midi, we have to go now!]" she yelled, yanking him off the ground.

When the two burst outside, they were horrified to see throngs of people racing through the street. The air raid siren was quite unbearable, but far worse were the scores of missiles streaming overhead. The distant bursts of light and low rumbles reminded Midi of a fireworks show, but even he sensed that something was very wrong.

"[Come Midi!]" Lamas yelled, finally picking her child up and carrying him.

Lamas spotted a familiar beacon and headed for the inviting purple glow. She knew that cheaper shelters were available in the outer sections of the neighborhood, but this was no time for frugality. Lamas gladly paid her steep admittance fee (small children were free) and entered the cramped bomb shelter.

Once inside, Lamas picked a spot on a bench near some old women, who were also Lotosian. As the minutes passed, Lamas began to regret her hasty decision. Romar had reassured her time and again that the Americans would never bomb the "[floating ghetto]" (as he called it). After all, he would always point out, there were missile defenses protecting the buildings in Minerva, but nothing like that out here. Lamas had always thought this to be a rather silly argument; there were spas in Minerva too, but that was because the people there were rich, not because they had more aches and pains.

In any event, if none of the missiles hit the largely Lotosian neighborhood, Lamas knew her husband would be furious at her frivolous expense. She felt ashamed of her emotional reaction, and did not look forward to telling her husband what she had done as he hobbled around the small apartment. The family had been so close to saving up for a new prosthetic leg for Romar, but then the tightened blockade had made it too risky.

There was no telling how much higher the cost of living would go, and Romar would never jeopardize his son's future to fix an old war injury.

\* \* \*

"Thirty-two reported hits, sixteen confirmed," the operator informed Peckard.

"Any of ours?" Peckard asked. So long as the missiles hit property insured by other companies, or not at all, then so much the better. But far too many were getting through for Peckard's liking; a few lucky strikes could cost the Trust millions of ounces.

"Six Trust items reported, two confirmed," a different operator said.

"Which?" Peckard asked, feeling queasy. He sincerely hoped it wasn't an apartment building: at a thousand ounces per person, that could add up quickly.

"The Callahan Bridge and a GemStar warehouse," the operator answered.

Peckard exhaled. The bridge wouldn't be too bad; no one would have been on it, and it had been designed for the easy replacement of damaged sections. The warehouse also wasn't a problem; anything valuable would've been moved into hardened bunkers.

"What's the status on the bombers?" Peckard asked. Now that the Trust's Defender model had held up for a good hour, knocking down hundreds of incoming cruise missiles, Peckard's only worry was the Stealth aircraft.

"Still on their runways," a third operator said. "Oh wait, it looks like they're getting ready to move." Alerted by the apparent spike in temperature, the operator quickly trained another of the Trust's satellites on the U.S.-controlled airfield for an independent reading.

\* \* \*

"Lord, if you get me through this," Tom Flanagan bargained, "I swear, I'll become a pacifist."

Flanagan's eyes scanned the horizon, even though he knew it was pointless. He kept trying to comfort himself. Objectively, there should have been nothing to worry about: The boys in HQ knew exactly where the bombers were, and all he had to do was

get close enough to squeeze off all his Interceptors, then turn hard and get the hell out of there.

Flanagan vowed that this time, he would be more prudent with his earnings. He decided that even if he and every other pilot got home without a scratch, taking on F-117s was the sort of thing you should only do *once* in your life. Yes sir, if and when Flanagan made it back, he'd take the penalty and immediately retire.

\* \* \*

“A hit!” the operator squealed, then regained his professional composure. “That’s confirmed, we definitely have a splash,” he said after a moment.

Peckard clenched his right fist in satisfaction, then finally allowed himself to relax. Even if the rest of the bombers made it through, it didn’t matter in the grand scheme: The Trust had just survived what should have been a crippling bombardment of cruise missiles, and had now even destroyed a Stealth bomber.

Peckard smiled. There was definitely a new force in global affairs.

## Twenty-Nine

“Sure I can’t talk you out of this?” O’Toole asked, knowing what the reply would be.

“Yes, Peter,” Mason answered. “These missile strikes are only the beginning. I feel as if my remaining time is limited.”

“That’s not the Mason I used to know,” O’Toole said. “Back when everyone else was saying Hail Marys at the thought of an invasion from Lugar, you were urging me to buy real estate.”

Mason laughed.

“Yes, but it was different then. At that point, I was elated just with the fact that Minerva *existed*. It didn’t matter if I died; it was enough that the society and its institutions would live on.”

“And now?” O’Toole asked.

“And now,” Mason said, staring out the O’Tooles’ giant window at the eastern coast, “I have grown accustomed to the success of my ideas. There is nothing now that can stop the spread of freedom. And so I want to move on. Just yesterday I learned that Roderick Dupont, the philosopher, has decided to take the jeneers’ offer. That makes my decision an easy one.”

O’Toole nodded, knowing further arguments were useless. For several months Mason had been seriously discussing a move to the jeneers’ island, but O’Toole thought the professor had just grown flighty in his old age.

(*Jeneers* was the slang term for the few dozen genetically engineered [“gen-eered”] humans grown in Minervan labs. From almost the beginning, scientists on Minerva had conducted research that was illegal in other countries. [Indeed, these experiments constituted a major plank in the United Nations’ case against the island.] At first, the medical procedures consisted of gene therapy for inherited diseases, as well as trivial applications such as choosing a child’s hair or eye color.

Soon enough, the alarmists’ worst fears were realized. After a brief legal battle, companies began soliciting DNA samples from extraordinary individuals in order to



create genetically superior children, who were then sold for exorbitant amounts to wealthy parents. [Depending on the clients, the adoptive parents' own DNA was usually represented, in varying percentages, in the child as well.] The hopes—and horrors—for a new breed of Minervan *ubermen* were dashed, however, within a few years. For some inexplicable reason, when the jeneers reached puberty, their nervous systems suffered enormous damage, leaving the child in exquisite pain and requiring constant medical supervision. Thus, just a decade after they had started, the jeneer programs were virtually discontinued except for a few stubborn researchers who wanted to solve the “puberty problem.”

Partly out of guilt but mostly out of relief, the parents of the jeneers jointly financed a special platform to house and care for their freakish children. Located ten kilometers off the southern coast, the facility boasted state-of-the-art medical equipment for the physically debilitated. The platform's amenities allowed the jeneers to exist almost independent from outside supervision.

The uplifting twist in the sad tale occurred three months after the jeneers had all been relocated to their customized island. Despite their handicaps and constant pain, the children were still quite gifted intellectually. A few retired academics had petitioned for the right to work with the children, and were admitted. After only two weeks, the academics [with the approval of the jeneers' guardians] invited scholars from all areas to move to the tiny island. There, they were promised an unimaginable intellectual climate in which to exchange ideas and conduct research. The only stipulation: Those moving to the island had to promise never to leave, and all contact with the outside world would be limited to academic publications. The jeneers were apparently extremely private, and did not want their embarrassing condition to become fodder for gossips.

As one can imagine, at first the invitation went largely unheeded. But gradually, a few scholars—all close to death—agreed to the terms and moved to the island. The quality of their output in their respective academic journals was so pronounced that soon other, younger intellectuals began to move as well.)

“Thank you again for your generosity,” Mason said.

“Of course, David.”

In order to limit applicants, as well as finance the on-going operation of the facility, the jeneers insisted on a hefty fee for prospective newcomers. The O'Tooles were only too happy to pay the sum on Mason's behalf. They had donated almost the entirety of their fortune to various philanthropic concerns, especially college endowments, and this gift to Mason had been negligible in comparison.

O'Toole waited for the old man to speak. Instead, Mason continued to stare out the window at the booming metropolis. In the distance, hundreds of small craft littered the ocean, consisting of merchantmen, recreational boaters, and ferries to the outer platforms.

"We really did it, didn't we?" Mason finally said.

"It was your composition," O'Toole said. "I was just the conductor."

"You are a very decent man, Peter," Mason said. "And you have a wonderful family."

"Thank you, David," O'Toole said, blushing slightly.

"I'm sure you already suspect this," Mason said, "but your son is fantastically clever. The best I've ever encountered. Once he gains his confidence, heaven help the man who challenges him."

"I know," O'Toole said, "but thank you. Danny just needs to come out of his shell, and he'll do great things."

O'Toole still didn't quite understand why his son was so shy. Perhaps, if he and Tara had had another child, he could have done a better job.

"And your wife," Mason said. "What can I say, except that I am truly sorry. Please excuse my indefensible behavior."

"What're you talking about?" O'Toole asked.

Mason stopped staring out the window and turned to face O'Toole.

"Peter, surely you realize that I have been plotting desperately to seduce your wife."

"What the fuck are you talking about?" O'Toole said.

"Peter, since the day I read her review of my novel, not an hour has gone by in which I failed to fantasize about Tara McClare. And I should stress," Mason said, raising a finger, "that it has always been Tara *McClare* with whom I have been infatuated."

“Well I guess it’s a good thing you’re an old man,” O’Toole said, barely above a whisper.

Mason’s head drooped. Had he realized that Peter genuinely did not know, he would have said nothing. And now, he certainly would refrain from divulging the details of his intricate plot, which involved a plausible excuse to take Tara alone out for dinner and dancing, and a superbly crafted monologue in which he would reveal his desires and let her realize that all of his sexist banter over the years had really been just a vehicle for her attention.

“Yes, Peter,” Mason said, breaking the awkward silence, “I *am* an old man. I’ll go now to my final resting place.”

Mason tipped his hat and headed for the door.

## Thirty

Dan got up from his computer when he heard the familiar knock. Anticipation built as he headed for the door, even though he knew it had to be a coincidence.

“Matt!” he yelled as he threw open the door.

“What’s up, little man?” Matt said as he entered the dorm room.

After throwing a duffel bag against the far wall, Matt very deliberately surveyed the room.

“Holy shit dude,” he said, peering at the walls, “what’d you do to get thrown in here? Stick a shiv in a guard?”

“Yeah, it’s a bit cramped,” Dan agreed.

“Cramped?” Matt asked. “A nun’s box is cramped. That sub I took over here, that was cramped. But *this* is downright subatomic.”

“I know,” Dan said, but his attention had returned to his computer.

“Please tell me I didn’t cross the fucking Pacific to watch you play *Myst*,” Matt pleaded.

“Hang on, I’m trying to get this girl and her friends to meet up with us,” Dan said, typing and smiling.

“Objection withdrawn,” Matt said and sauntered over to the computer. “So tell me, do these girls like to bathe together?”

“Gotta hope so,” Dan said, still distracted by his internet flirting. “This girl is smoking, and at least two of her friends are pretty hot too.”

Matt smiled. Sometimes Dan could be really cute; the kid had obviously been overwhelmed by his female classmates. *That old song was right*, Matt thought. The beaches on Minerva certainly had nothing on the lovely ladies of California.

Matt waited a minute or two patiently, but Dan showed no signs of stopping.

“Look Danny boy,” he said, “I risked a lot to come here. If those lasses want to drink, then great, we’ll see them at the bar. But let’s go. For all you know, you’re talking to a thirty-five-year-old pedophile.”

“All right all right,” Dan said. “Oh wait, she wants to talk to you.”

“So she can do that at the bar,” Matt said. He had folded his arms and was literally tapping his foot.

“C’mon,” Dan said, “just type something. She wants to go but her friends want to stay in and watch a movie.”

“Danny Danny Danny,” Matt said, “I’m buyin tonight. We can splurge and get hookers if we want. I’m not going to beg some seventeen-year-old chick—”

“She’s fifteen,” Dan said.

Matt froze. He had completely forgotten Danny’s age; it was hard with the kid’s vocabulary.

“Well that’s something entirely else,” Matt said, sitting down in front of the keyboard.

“HOW R U GORJUS?” he typed.

“good...you?” the fifteen-year-old answered.

“I = STUPENDOUS,” Matt replied.

“ha. my friend wants to know how old you r?”

Matt quickly processed dozens of considerations. He decided to go with the lowest age that could possibly be believed if and when the girls ever saw him.

“20 BUT I DONT LOOK A DAY OVER 17,” he typed.

“why are you hanging out with someone so young?” the girl asked.

“LETS MAKE A DEAL,” Matt typed. “YOU DONT ASK ME QUESTIONS LIKE THAT, AND I WONT ASK YOU WHY YOU MAKE OUT WITH 20 YEAR OLD GUYS.”

Dan giggled over Matt’s shoulder. Matt had decided that he would only spend another two minutes or so on this project. The payoff, though substantial, was extremely unlikely. After an unusually long delay, a response came.

“hey this is cindy,” the apparently new girl typed.

“HEY CINDY,” Matt answered, now very bored. “I HEAR THAT YOU ARE AN EVEN BETTER KISSER THAN”—

“Shit, what’s the first girl’s name?” Matt asked.

“Oh, Heather,” Dan replied.

“BETTER KISSER THAN HEATHER. IS THAT TRUE?”

“maybe so...guess you’ll have to find out,” Cindy replied.

Matt was ashamed to discover that his penis had begun to stiffen. He vowed to end this nonsense quickly.

“SOUNDS GREAT. SO WELL SEE YOU IN AN HOUR,” he typed.

“Seriously,” Matt said to Dan, “we’re leaving in thirty seconds.”

“maybe if you buy me a drink ;-)” Cindy typed.

“What the fuck happened there?” Matt said. “Did the cat jump on their keyboard?”

“No,” Dan said, laughing, “that’s an emoticon. It’s a wink. It’s on its side, see?”

*This is seriously gay*, Matt decided. It was time to end the tomfoolery.

“MAYBE IF YOU BLOW ME :-o <===8” Matt typed, then stood up from the computer.

\* \* \*

“I don’t know what’s up with these directions,” Matt said as they walked down another side street, looking for a bar where even someone as young as Danny would be served. “I’m sorry Dan, I should’ve gotten a specific address. *Damn* that was dumb.”

“No problem,” Dan said. “What exactly did he say?”

“He said the bar was on Plymouth Avenue,” Matt said, checking the piece of paper yet again. “Five minutes past the Blue Lagoon,” Matt read aloud.

“Excuse me,” Matt said as a couple approached. “Do you guys know where The Crazy Horse bar is?”

“Yeah, it’s that way,” the man said, pointing down the street. “About fifteen blocks or so.”

“Oh okay,” Matt said, smiling. “Thanks a lot.”

After twelve blocks of brisk walking, Dan said, “I see it!”

Indeed, Matt squinted and could just make out the familiar purple sign.

“Remind me to have some words with the shithead on the phone,” Matt said. “Who ever heard of giving time elapses for someone on foot? ‘Five minutes past the Blue Lagoon,’” he muttered. “Yeah, if you’re a fucking kangaroo.”

\* \* \*

“So I never asked you,” Dan said after the waitress had served them their beers, “how come you got in so early? I wasn’t expecting you until ten or eleven.”

“Well, it’s like I said,” Matt explained, “they don’t tell you exactly when or where you’ll get dropped off. After the sub docked, there was a shuttle waiting that dropped a bunch of us off at a bus station. They gave us tickets for our ultimate destinations, and I just got lucky that my bus left right away.”

“Explain to me again all the cloak and dagger?” Dan said.

“Think about it,” Matt answered. “The U.S. has really clamped down on travel from Minerva. So these companies smuggling people into and out of the country will get absolutely fucked if they get caught. Now rather than do background checks on everybody who buys a ticket, all they do is make sure even the passengers themselves don’t know exactly when and where their sub will land. So there won’t be federal marshals waiting when it arrives.”

“But you *did* tell them where you wanted to be dropped off,” Dan said. “So you knew where you were going to be, and you also knew the approximate time.”

“Right,” Matt said, “so if I were a government informant, I could tell them where to arrest me. But the guys on the sub or driving the shuttle are fine; I didn’t know which bus station they’d drop me off at. I didn’t even know they *would* drop me off at a bus station until it happened.”

“Oh okay,” Dan said. “How much did the whole thing cost, anyway?”

“More than you want to know,” Matt admitted.

\* \* \*

“Yeah, we’ll be down in a minute,” Dan said, then hung up the phone. “Okay, we can hang out at Jeremy’s room.”

“Is the card game on?” Matt asked. If he couldn’t bang fifteen-year-old girls tonight, maybe he could screw fifteen-year-old boys.

“Probably,” Dan answered, “but everybody’s still at practice. Did you bring that stuff? Jeremy said we can break it out in his room.”

“Oh we can, can we?” Matt said, smiling. “Is it okay with Jeremy if I give out handjobs, too? I wouldn’t want to violate house rules or anything.”

“Huh?” Dan said, momentarily perplexed. “Oh, they’ll throw in a few dollars for it—”

“It’s all right, Danny boy, my treat,” Matt said. “Besides, I’ve got the good shit on me. You guys would have to be my indentured servants to pay for it.”

Dan and Matt left his tiny room and headed down the hallway. Rather than taking the shortest route, Dan went out of his way to take Matt by the older kids’ rooms. Dan was proud to have someone as cool as Matt King as a friend. Even though the kids here didn’t know him, Matt just *looked* cool. And Dan also thought that after hanging out at Jeremy’s, word would get around about Dan’s older friend from Minerva.

\* \* \*

“You said that to *Cindy*?” Jeremy said, laughing. “That’s fucking great. It’s about time someone told that b’yach what to do with her big mouth.”

Matt grinned, but played it off as if it *weren’t* at the boy’s use of “b’yach.”

“Hey,” Matt said, raising his can of cheap beer, “I call it like I see it, you know?”

“So I hear you’re from Minerva,” Kevin, Jeremy’s roommate, said. “What’s *that* all about?”

“No, I’m from Chicago,” Matt said, glancing at Dan. “I got this *weed* from a guy from Minerva; that’s probably what you’re thinking of.”

“Huh, my bad,” Kevin said. “I thought you were from Minerva.”

“Nope,” Matt said, “unless they made a giant replica of the Windy City and never told me about it, like in that Jim Carrey movie.”

The boys laughed. Matt decided to divert their attention by unveiling his killer buds.

“All right fellas,” Matt said, pulling out the bag from his inside jacket pocket, “feast your eyes on that.”



“You say this is from the island?” Jeremy said. “No shit, your buddy bought this in a store, right? Look, it’s actually in a package with a brand name and everything.”

“Fellas, I don’t smoke generic,” Matt said.

Matt began rolling a fat joint. He noted with amusement the determination with which Dan studied his movements.

“Stick with me kid,” Matt said, handing the completed project to Dan, “and you too can grow up to be a pothead.”

“Say,” Kevin asked, “how old are you, anyway?”

“What is this, twenty questions?” Matt complained. “That little girl kept asking me my age too. Come to think of it, how old are *you*? I’m not sure you should smoke this stuff; your parents might sue me.”

“Kev, chill,” Jeremy said. “It’s all good, man. We appreciate your sharing.”

“And I appreciate your hospitality,” Matt said. “So tell me, when’s the card game starting? I have to scrounge up my return fare.”

Matt realized with alarm that these kids weren’t supposed to know he was traveling to Minerva. But he quickly relaxed, since his statement could simply mean a trip back to Chicago.

“People should be showing up in about an hour,” Jeremy said. “So Dan, are you gonna fire that thing up, or are you waiting for them to legalize it?”

Dan was frozen. He wasn’t sure how to light the joint; the two times he had previously smoked, it had been out of Matt’s bowl. He was afraid that he would look like an idiot, trying to light it, or worse, that he would somehow ruin Matt’s masterpiece.

“Hey, I’ve got class,” Dan said, handing the joint to Jeremy. “Please, I insist.”

“Yeah, you’ve got class all right,” Kevin said, “that’s why you can’t get laid.”

“Hallo, what’s this?” Matt said.

“Yeah,” Kevin said, laughing. “Dan’s going for the Smooth Operator approach, but so far he’s Mr. Rosy Palms.”

Matt smiled, and saw that Jeremy was quite amused at the ribbing. To Matt’s dismay, Dan just chuckled.

“Well, there’s nothing wrong with holding out for a prime piece of ass,” Matt opined. “And anyway, if those sluts hanging around outside the dorm are any indication, I think you boys are better off keeping your dick in your pants around here.”

\* \* \*

“Whoa man,” Jeremy said, “this *is* good pot.”

“The King always delivers,” Matt said, taking a puff of the joint and handing it to Dan. He noticed that Dan hadn’t been talking much in the last half hour or so. He hoped the poor guy didn’t puke in front of the older kids.

“So what’s up with this fucking war?” Matt suddenly asked, curious about the youngsters’ thoughts. “Should we send in the Marines or what?”

“Who the fuck knows,” Jeremy said. “My uncle—he was in Nam—says that Lympman’ll never send troops in, since they’d get their fucking knees blown off like those dudes who tried to invade the island before.”

“Whatever man,” Kevin said, “those people were just trying to take their land back, they weren’t ‘invading’ shit.”

“I’m gonna piss,” Dan said, getting up. Inasmuch as his father was directly responsible for the original acquisition of the island, the conversation was making him very uncomfortable.

“So what do you think we should do?” Matt asked Kevin, remembering to sound American.

“Lympman’s doing a good job right now,” Kevin explained. “Those Minervans think they’re above the rules, and as usual it’s the U.S. who has to show them what’s up. You got all these whiny activists saying we need peace, but *they* attacked *our* satellites. Lympman’s doing the best he can to limit this thing, but those fuckers won’t back down.”

“So you think we *should* send in the Marines?” Matt asked, amused by the hawkish sentiments from the boy who had no qualms about smoking his marijuana.

“Hell no,” Kevin said. He was really worked up by this point. “Jeremy’s uncle is right; that would be crazy. Nah, Lympman should go on prime time TV, tell those fuckers to stop laundering mob money and hiding ex-Nazis and all the rest of their shit,

or else we nuke them. Give them a few months if you want, but don't dick around by sending in more and more ships. That's just stupid."

"Yeah, that's stupid," Jeremy agreed. He didn't want to say more, since he still wasn't sure where Matt stood on the matter.

\* \* \*

"Oh, he's so fulla shit!" the boys yelled.

The game was seven-card stud, and Matt was showing two kings, a ten, and a four. Jeremy was the only other remaining player, and he was holding (and showing everyone else) a pair of aces and a pair of threes.

"I don't know," Jeremy said, "that's a lot of money."

Matt began humming and sang, almost inaudibly, "We-e-e, three kings, of Orient are..."

Jeremy threw down his hand.

"Nope," he said. "I don't know how he plays yet. I'm not gonna blow a week at work when I'm already up."

The boys groaned. Matt smiled and collected the pot.

*Like takin a cherry from a virgin,* he thought.

\* \* \*

"Damnit!" Dan yelled as his jumpshot airballed. He was always money in practice, but in actual games he always choked.

"It's all right Danny, shake it off," Matt said. The two were down 8-3 against Jeremy and Kevin.

Jeremy grabbed the airball and quickly banked it in.

"That's nine," Kevin said, catching the ball at the top of the key. "What do you guys have, two?"

"Three, asshole," Matt said, wiping his face on his shirt. "Damn boys, I haven't sweat like this since that night with Kevin's mom."

(After the previous night's events, Matt had decided to show Dan that this kid Kevin was a punk.)

"Yeah, scoreboard old man," Kevin said, then drove hard at Matt. Matt managed to strip the ball and looked for Dan to cut to the basket.

Dan anticipated Matt's steal, and knew full well that he ought to sprint past Jeremy, but he instead popped back out. He managed to convince himself that Matt needed room to drive in, but the real reason was that Dan was afraid of blowing a wide-open layup.

Matt was perplexed by Dan's movement; the kid usually played better than this. But he shrugged it off, crossed over to his left hand, and drove past Kevin. After finger rolling the ball over the rim, he rested the ball between his right elbow and stomach, and bent over with his hands on his knees.

"Oh Danny," he said, wheezing. "I think it's me pumper."

"We can just quit," Dan said, "you guys are killing us anyway."

"Are you out of your fucking mind?" Matt said, now able to stand upright. "Matt King never just gives up. Sure, I might get crushed, but I don't give up. Let's go, we're only down by five."

## Thirty-One

“David!” Roderick Dupont yelled. He stood up and waved Mason over to the table where he was sitting with another man.

“Charles, may I introduce to you David Mason, the finest economist and political scientist of our generation. David, this is Charles Emerson, the distinguished biologist.”

The two old men shook hands.

“Pleasure to actually meet you, Dr. Mason,” Emerson said. “Please join us.”

Mason nodded graciously and sat down.

“Did you just get in?” Dupont asked.

“Yes,” Mason answered. “The boat dropped me off about a half hour ago. I just freshened up in my room and strolled out here to see if anyone were still awake.”

“Well,” Dupont said with a smile, “at this time of night, usually you’ll only find Charles and myself up. Most of the other fellows here need to turn in much earlier.”

“I’ve always been a bit of a night owl,” Emerson said. “I do my best thinking at night.”

“As do I,” Mason said. “So what were you gentlemen discussing? Far be it from me to disturb your scholarly pursuits.”

“Actually,” Dupont said, “we were discussing the so-called ‘vulnerable balls’ problem. This week’s seminar is on Intelligent Design, and so naturally we’re all brushing up on our evolutionary theo—”

“Did you say Intelligent Design??” Mason asked. He thought he’d come here to *escape* pseudo-scientific garbage.

“Hey,” Dupont said, holding up his hands, “house rules. Members can propose any topic they like.”

“And who is proposing that we waste our time debating Intelligent Design?” Mason asked. He knew that Dupont was a staunch atheist, and assumed that any biologist would be familiar with the silly anti-evolution arguments.

“Oh,” Emerson said, “Novak. Paul Novak, the theologian. He got here about three months ago. For his last seminar we got bogged down on whether the First Mover

solution to the infinite regress should be considered a point in favor of the existence of God.”

“Don’t worry David,” Dupont said, laughing. “The other seminars are all completely rigorous. And as far as theologians go, Novak’s not bad.”

“You will forgive me if I reserve judgment,” Mason said. “But I am certainly not averse to exploring evolutionary theory. What exactly were you discussing?”

“It’s called the ‘vulnerable balls’ problem,” Emerson said. “You know: why would it ever be adaptive for a creature to expose its sexual organs the way human males and certain other mammals do? Why aren’t the testicles carried inside the body for protection, instead of dangling in a defenseless sack?”

“And I was saying, just when you came in,” Dupont said, “that I thought it might have something to do with keeping the sperm warmer than the rest of the body.”

“Actually,” Emerson said, “the testicles themselves are kept cooler than the rest of the body’s interior. But your suggestion, though a good one, isn’t the currently accepted explanation.”

“What is it, then?” Dupont asked.

“Well,” Emerson said, “the prevailing theory is that it acts as a signal to females. It’s the same explanation as the peacock’s plumage: Although it is not advantageous by itself, the fact that the males have such a handicap and yet survive indicates to potential mates that their other qualities must be superlative.”

“I have always considered that a cop-out,” Mason said. “You can explain anything that way; even apparent weaknesses get turned into strengths, and Darwinism becomes non-falsifiable.”

“Starting to sound like Novak,” Dupont joked.

“Hold on a moment,” Emerson said, somewhat taken aback. “Do you deny that the male’s other traits must compensate for his vulnerability?”

“No I don’t deny it,” Mason said, “but the male does not simply pass on those other traits—he passes on his vulnerable balls too. So when a female sees him, all she can rationally conclude is, ‘This male has managed to survive, and our offspring would have half of his genetic material.’ That is precisely what she would conclude by looking at some other male, who did not have vulnerable balls and managed to survive.”

“Oh come now, Dr. Mason,” Emerson said, “you’re attacking a very powerful explanatory device in evolutionary theory.”

“Yes,” Mason agreed, “tautologies can be quite useful.”

“So do you even doubt the peacock explanation?” Emerson said, with a hint of amusement in his voice. He felt quite relieved that Mason had turned out to be so ignorant in this area; the man had quite a reputation.

“That one seems more plausible,” Mason admitted, “because it is so clearly related to a signaling mechanism. I imagine one could come up with a reasonable model in which the superior males efficiently invest some of their resources in plumage, because it’s easier for females to distinguish bright from lackluster feathers than it is to monitor a male’s ability to evade predators. In this respect, it is analogous to a human female being attracted to the big spender at a cocktail party. What I am objecting to is the knee-jerk invocation of sexual selection whenever we find an apparent handicap in nature.”

“And what is *your* explanation for vulnerable balls?” Emerson asked.

“Let me think a moment,” Mason said.

Dupont and Emerson sipped from their tea—now lukewarm—while Mason stared into space.

“You will think me a hypocrite,” Mason said, “because I have come up with a sexual selection answer myself. But since we *are* dealing with sexual organs, I think it’s appropriate.”

“Fine,” Emerson said, amused. “So what’s your theory?”

“I wonder,” Mason said, “if it might have something to do with the fact that the testicles are the one weak spot of a human male. In other words, it’s not merely that exposed testicles make the male worse in an absolute sense; but it *also* is the only thing that gives the female a chance in a physical confrontation. So perhaps the female is attracted to a male with ‘vulnerable balls’ because she knows she can discontinue future copulation if she wishes, whereas this would be almost impossible against a male with protected testicles.”

“Very interesting,” Emerson said. “Now let’s draw some empirical implications from your explanation and see if they agree with Nature...”

\* \* \*

“So do the children participate in the seminars?” Mason asked Dupont. Emerson had long since retired to bed.

“No David,” Dupont said, shaking his head. “They would be much too boring.”

Mason’s eyebrows shot up.

“David,” Dupont said, choosing his words carefully, “just wait until you meet Nicodemus. Then you’ll start to understand.”

“He was the first?” Mason asked.

“Yes, Nicodemus is the oldest jener. He welcomes all of the academics when they first arrive. He’s the most sociable of the jeners.”

“What’s he like?” Mason asked. “I assume he’s incredibly intelligent.”

Dupont threw back his head and laughed.

“David,” he said, “you won’t believe it until you meet them. And I won’t talk further about it—you’ll see for yourself. But I suppose it wouldn’t hurt to tell you one thing, to give you time to prepare.”

“What’s that?” Mason asked.

“After meeting Nicodemus, you will see Ludwig—”

“Ludwig?” Mason asked in surprise.

“Yes, I think his parents were fans of Wittgenstein,” Dupont explained. “Ludwig is by far the smartest of the lot. His DNA was based on samples from Einstein’s brain and a few others. Anyway, you get to ask him one question.”

“What do you mean?” Mason said.

“I mean,” Dupont said, unable to restrain a large grin, “that after you chit-chat with Nicodemus, you get to ask Ludwig any one question.”

“About what?” Mason asked.

“*Anything*,” Dupont said, now smiling even more broadly.

“And then what happens?” Mason said. He didn’t know why, but he felt...creepy.

“And then Ludwig answers it,” Dupont said.



Try as he might, Mason couldn't avoid feeling a chill run down his spine. He noticed that his arms were flush with goosebumps.

"What did you ask him?" Mason asked softly.

"I'm a philosopher," Dupont said. "I asked him, 'Why?'"

*Excellent*, Mason thought. Thus far, the two best answers he had heard to this most famous of questions were, "Because," and "Why not?"

"What did he say?" Mason asked, even more softly.

"'Why?'" Dupont answered.

Mason paused. Did Dupont honestly not understand why Mason would want to know...or was *that* the jener's answer?

Dupont smiled.

"I imagine you're going through the same thought process that I did when he said that to me. But believe me, David, his answer was the best I could've received. It will keep my puny little mind busy for the rest of my days here. Because if you try to answer it—if you try to explain *why it is* that you want to know, 'Why?', then you start to come up with a pretty good answer to your original question."

## Thirty-Two

“The next issue,” boomed the moderator, “is the situation with Minerva. If elected, how would your administration handle the lawless island? Senator Stumpel, it’s your turn to start.”

“The unfortunate situation with Minerva,” the senator said, looking into the television camera, “is the result of a failure of leadership and diplomacy. With all due respect to President Lympman, he has always been a champion of domestic affairs. But when it comes to the international arena, well, you need someone at the helm with experience in foreign affairs. Now before serving three satisfying terms as senator from the lovely state of Virginia, I spent fifteen years in the Central Intelligence Agency. When you spend a good deal of time working with classified material, you began to get a feel for how the leaders of other countries really think. You start to understand how to *deal* with these people, on their level. And so, as I say, with all due respect, I think the hostilities with Minerva are a result of President Lympman and his administration not having the requisite experience in foreign affairs. Of course no one wants to point fingers at this point in the game, but there was never a problem under the Greene Administration.”

*That son of a bitch*, Black thought.

“Thank you, Senator Stumpel,” the moderator said. “Same question, Vice President Black: If elected, how would you handle the anarchist threat?”

“If elected,” Black began, trying to bury his fury at Stumpel, “I would continue the same strategy of nonviolent containment that has been so successful under the leadership of President Lympman. My overriding concern will be, as it has always been, to protect the interests of the American people while minimizing the harm to innocent Minervan children. Our economic blockade is an unfortunate necessity to achieve compliance with international law, but we must never forget that such a policy will always adversely affect the underprivileged the hardest. Now, I recognize that many of my peers in the faithful opposition wish a more aggressive response to the attack on our space assets, but the American people certainly do not want their brave sons and

daughters sent into a battle that can be avoided. Under a plan that I proposed, the current administration has pursued the matter in the Minervan courts, and the U.S. government actually won a settlement, receiving full financial restitution for the damage to our satellites. We've also pumped millions of dollars into educational campaigns to raise awareness on the island of their responsibility to the world community. In this manner, the current administration has sought to enforce the rules, yes, but also to encourage voluntary compliance on the part of the Minervans, by working with their various communities. I believe that in the long run, this strategy of the carrot-and-stick will be much more effective than the full-scale invasion advocated by some of my Republican colleagues. Finally, although I agree with Senator Stumpel that what's important now is a *solution* to the crisis, we can't prevent future situations unless we understand what caused the present one. Let us not forget that the initial colonization of Minerva occurred with the full blessing of the Greene Administration. President Lympman and I simply inherited the problem that the Republicans created."

"Thank you, Vice President Black," the moderator said. "Finally, Mr. Adams: If elected to the office of president of the United States, what would *you* do to handle the Minervans?"

"If elected," Adams said, smiling into the camera, "I would return America's foreign policy to the original vision of George Washington: free trade with all nations, and military force only to defend the United States from attack. Now folks, I know you don't like to hear this, but the present 'crisis' is directly the fault of our aggressive posture. The people of Minerva are just like you and me; thirty percent of them were *born* in America, for heaven's sake. Now how would *you* feel if you were on a tiny island in the middle of the Pacific, minding your own business, when all of a sudden the entire industrialized world tried to cut off your food supply? I bet it would make you mad, wouldn't it? Why, you'd probably want to start sinking those ships that were arresting merchants who were only trying to bring food to feed your starving children. But guess what, folks? The Minervans didn't do that. All they did was to disable the *military satellites* that were being used to starve their children. The only other things they've 'attacked' were U.S. missiles and planes that were trying to blow them up! Does anybody really think that the Minervans are a threat? What are they going to do, exactly?"

Send us computers for free? Bombard us with more lobster? Develop even better medical techniques? Incidentally, on that note, I think the voters deserve to know why Senator Stumpel—who claims that genetic engineering is ‘morally repugnant’—had no problem exercising a special exemption five years ago to go to the island for a kidney transplant. And as far as Vice President Black’s claim that the U.S. was reimbursed for the damage to its satellites, what he’s not telling us is that no money was actually paid, since there were *offsetting* claims against the U.S. government in the Minervan courts because of our illegal blockade. I realize many of you don’t want to hear this, but I’m afraid, my fellow Americans, that we need to face up to the truth: The major countries of the world are *afraid* of the tiny island of Minerva, because it shows just how unnecessary and unproductive their onerous taxes and bureaucratic red tape really are. The Minervan people are getting along just fine without a class of parasite politicians, and so the politicians—including some from the U.S. of A—are going to do their best to destroy them. I trust that the American people will object to this immoral use of their brave soldiers, and will vote in November for a candidate who will return foreign policy to the original vision of our Founding Fathers.”

*That’s right, Black thought, smiling, keep talking like that, and I’ll be sure to win.*

## Thirty-Three

“*That’s not good,*” Matt said, peering through the binoculars. He could just make out the Navy destroyer.

“Mayday mayday,” Quinn said into the microphone, not knowing if this were the correct terminology but feeling the situation to be an emergency. “I’ve got someone right on my ass; do you guys see him?”

“*We are aware of the bogey,*” the speaker informed the men. “*It is the U.S.S. Hopper. Immediately increase your speed to fifty knots.*”

“We can’t!” Quinn yelled. “We’re loaded down with barrels of oil. We’re only making twenty-nine knots.”

“*Your cargo is circuit boards,*” the speaker said.

“I think I know what my fucking cargo is,” Quinn said. “We were originally scheduled for electronics, but they changed it at the dock.”

“*We’ve got you down as carrying circuit boards and capable of fifty knots,*” the speaker said.

“Ahh shit,” Jim muttered.

“They’re not stopping, sir,” the sailor informed Captain Pierce.

“We’ve still got plenty of room,” Pierce said, referring to the 200-kilometer radius. “Fire a warning shot.”

The men heard the whistle of the shell as it approached and splashed a few dozen meters ahead of the ship.

“Jack, we need to stop,” Jim said.

“What’s the sentence for smuggling?” Matt asked.

“It doesn’t matter,” Jim said. “Jack, we need to stop. With this much oil, one hit and we’ll go up in flames.”

\* \* \*

Quinn counted off the seconds in his head. He and his crew were being escorted, handcuffed behind their backs, to the brig by three M.P.s carrying M-16s.

*Three Mississippi, two Mississippi, one,* Quinn thought, and tensed. He had obviously counted a bit quickly, but knew it would be coming soon. Quinn had long ago decided which of the sailors was the most alert, and had made sure that Jim knew of his choice.

*BCKKKKKK!!!* Everyone except Quinn instinctively ducked his head when the small vessel exploded in flames. Quinn lifted his right foot and brought it down at an angle against the left knee of his sailor, who had been walking just behind Quinn and to his right. The young man howled with agony as his leg snapped inward, and then crumpled to the deck. In one smooth motion, Quinn brought his right foot back to the deck, spun clockwise on it, and brought his left knee squarely into the nose of the sailor. The young man's face squirted blood as he fell onto his back. Quinn stepped over his limp body, and carefully placed his right foot on the man's right wrist. Finally Quinn used his left foot to kick the weapon out of the man's hand.

As Quinn raced over to the rifle, he allowed himself to check the progress of the others. He was relieved to see that his crew had successfully disarmed the remaining two sailors, and were now in the process of trying to shoot Jim's handcuffs.

"Whoa, hold up!" Quinn yelled, and ran over to the men. Nook was holding the rifle, while Matt was overseeing the operation.

"Make sure that shit is pointed away from my ass," Jim insisted.

"Bend your hands at the wrists," Quinn said. "Okay Chris, fire a single round."

Within forty-five seconds, the six men were freed of their cuffs. With the sidearms carried by the Navy sailors, each of the men now had a weapon.

"Grab those two and let's move," Quinn ordered. "Matt, give me a hand."

Quinn held the M-16 in his right hand and grabbed his downed sailor by the shirt collar with his left. As he dragged him toward the stairs, Matt belatedly offered assistance by grabbing one of the sailor's legs.

Zach Weller frantically sprayed foam onto the burning wreck. As the minutes rolled by, he and the other young men realized that there was little hope of retrieving anything but the charred corpses of those who had been searching the blockade runner.

“Move and you’re dead.”

Zach felt a sharp object poking the small of his back. He was quickly patted down and ordered to turn around. As he did so, he saw with horror that the six smugglers had somehow gotten free and were now rounding up the crew as prisoners.

“Get me in touch with your captain,” Quinn said to Zach.

“Go fuck yourself,” Zach said.

Quinn shook his head with annoyance before grabbing Zach by the crotch and hoisting him over the edge of the destroyer.

“I want to talk to your captain,” Quinn said to the next sailor in line.

*“You listen to me,” Quinn said over the phone. “If you don’t raise the white flag and head for Minervan water, I won’t just kill your eighteen boys we’re holding here. I will first blow off their kneecaps, wait a good five minutes, then blow off their nuts. I’ll wait a few more minutes, then shoot them all once in the gut. Now you know as well as I do that your toy boat doesn’t mean shit in this war. So just do what I say, and be a good captain to Tommy Mercer, Joey Marino...”*

Pierce’s attention zoned away as Quinn recited the names of his captive men.

*The damn COWARDS!!* Pierce screamed in his mind.

## PART V



## Thirty-Four

“Well?” Tara asked as her husband emerged from his study.

“Hard to say,” O’Toole admitted.

“What does that mean?” Tara asked. “Either Danny raped her or he didn’t.”

“Tara, please calm down,” O’Toole said. “He’s really mixed up. Of course he doesn’t think he did—he said he was shocked by the charge.”

“So he didn’t rape her,” Tara said.

“Well...”

“Well what?” Tara asked.

“Well,” O’Toole said, “I asked him if it was possible that he misunderstood the situation, that the girl was too frightened to speak up, and he...hesitated. He wasn’t sure.”

“What’s the school say?” Tara asked.

“They’re waiting for the outcome of the police investigation.”

“This is crazy,” Tara said.

\* \* \*

Mason’s hand trembled as he opened the door and entered the inner chamber. Contrary to the public’s perception, the academics on the platform needed special permission to gain an audience with the jeneers.

“Dr. Mason, welcome,” a pleasant, youthful voice said from within the dark room. A large chair swiveled to reveal an apparent teenager.

“Nicodemus, I presume?” Mason asked, feigning nonchalance.

“My my, you *are* intelligent,” Nicodemus said. “Tell me, how have you enjoyed your first week with us? I hear you and the boys are discussing Gödel’s Incompleteness Theorem. That’s always fun.”

\* \* \*

*“Matthew, I need to talk with you right away,”* Tara’s voice urged on the machine. *“But if my husband answers when you call, hang up. I don’t want him to find out about this.”*

Matt took a few steps back from the phone, stunned. He had never actually thought it would happen.

“She wants my cock,” he whispered.

\* \* \*

“Dr. Mason,” Nicodemus said with amusement, “you seem puzzled. Is everything all right?”

Mason’s shock at the boy’s intellect subsided long enough for him to realize that yes, indeed, something *had* been puzzling him during their conversation.

“Aren’t you in terrible pain?” Mason asked. “You hide it very well.”

Nicodemus smiled.

“Dr. Mason,” he said, “I feel incredible. This isn’t surprising, since my body was literally designed for flawless running.”

“But...” Mason paused, not wanting to embarrass himself yet *again* in front of the boy. “Of course; you cured the puberty problem.”

“No,” Nicodemus said. “There was never anything to cure.”

“But all the testing...” Mason’s voice trailed off, as he once again caught himself. “And why?”

“Your privatized society is indeed an improvement,” Nicodemus said. “But people are still people. I was a very young boy indeed when I realized we ‘mutants’ would never be tolerated. So I did what I had to, to buy us the necessary time.”

“Time for what?” Mason asked. His stomach felt very uneasy.

“Time enough to ensure that no one can ever hurt us again.”

\* \* \*

*“Sheldon, it’s Peter O’Toole,”* the lawyer’s machine recorded. *“Call me as soon as you get this. I need to arrange a visit to Washington.”*

\* \* \*

“[Enter,]” Mason heard as he walked into Ludwig’s chamber.

Ludwig thought.

Mason fought down his panic when he saw the large brain—easily twice the size of a normal human’s—in a glass container filled with liquid. The brain was covered with countless fibers that ran out of the container and into the computer in which it was housed.

Ludwig thought.

“[May I have permission to explore your memories? It will make our communication much more efficient.]”

At this point, Mason realized that Ludwig had not been speaking at all.

Ludwig thought.

“Yes,” Mason said.

“[Pose your inquiry,]” Mason heard.

Ludwig thought.

Mason deliberated for a moment. He had had a backup question in mind, but now that he truly believed in what the others had said...he had to know.

“Besides the jeneers,” Mason said, “who is the smartest human being who has ever lived?”

“[According to your definition, David Mason is the smartest man with original DNA who has ever lived,]” Mason heard.

Ludwig thought.

## Thirty-Five

“How many jets could they possibly have?” Black asked.

“It’s hard to say, Mr. President,” General Merton answered. (Riggs had been sacked after the *Hopper* fiasco.) “Could be anywhere from 500 to 2,500.”

“Too many for a direct assault,” Black decided. The public would tolerate a lot at the moment, but not the sudden loss of dozens of pilots or more.

“Fuel is still their weakest spot,” Miller said. Since the election, the new president had encouraged Miller to speak his mind. “We should send in another carrier group, and double the patrol sorties. [\*\*\*]\*\* Force them to fall back on their SAM sites, or keep more of their own birds [\*\*\*]\*\* in the air. If they do the former, I think we can whittle down that blockade radius. And if the latter, they burn their gas that much quicker.”

\* \* \*

“*Dr. Childress is here,*” the intercom announced.

“Send him in, Rita,” Peckard said.

A small man with glasses entered.

“Dr. Childress, come in, come in,” Peckard said. “Please sit down.”

“Thank you,” Childress said. “Have you looked at my proposal? It will win the war.”

“Well let’s just slow down a bit,” Peckard said. “Yes, I read over your materials, and I was very interested in them. But naturally, I have to allow my own experts to evaluate your code. We wouldn’t want to infect every computer on the planet, now would we?”

“That’s why I developed the vaccine!” Childress said. “We’re wasting valuable time! The U.S. is sending another carrier as we speak!”

“I’m aware of the situation, Dr. Childress,” Peckard said. “You’ve got to understand that there are all sorts of legal and technical problems to consider before

we...unleash something like your little beastie. Incidentally, you *haven't* sent it anywhere yet...have you?"

"Of course not," Childress sulked. "We need to inoculate Minerva's systems first, and I can't very well explain the situation to our firms without tipping off the U.S. That's why I sent it to you!!"

"And I appreciate it very much," Peckard said. "I'll tell you what: Why don't you come work for the Trust, so you can oversee the development of this project. I'm sure my teams would love to have the author of the virus to answer their questions."

"Oh...okay," Childress said. He could not *believe* Peckard's blindness.

"Thank you, Dr. Childress. I'll have Rita give you more details on your way out. See you on Monday."

Childress gave a slight jerk with his head and left the office.

*What a nut*, Peckard thought. This battle of wits with the United States was getting far too expensive for Peckard's liking. He was beyond ready to call it a draw; the last thing in the world he needed was a terrorist strike on American computers.

"*Captain Quinn is here*," Rita announced a few moments later.

"Send him in," Peckard said.

Quinn entered the room and shook Peckard's hand.

"Mr. Peckard, it's an honor. What you've managed to do...simply incredible."

"The honor is likewise," Peckard said. "My claim to fame is capturing an army with 600 snipers. But *you* managed to capture a destroyer with only six men. Maybe *you* should be sitting behind this desk."

"Well," Quinn said, blushing, "people are always surprised by what they can do when they have to."

"Indeed," Peckard said, sitting back down. "So tell me, what's your legal status?"

"It looks like it'll be fine," Quinn said, sitting down himself. "The rest of my crew was exonerated immediately. There was an issue about a certain Navy sailor that I threw overboard, but since we picked him up my actions were ruled acceptable self-defense."

"Excellent," Peckard said. "And what are your plans for the future?"

“I think it’s gonna be more of the dog that bit me,” Quinn said. “I lost my entire cargo, not to mention a brand new ship. I’ll probably stay away from smuggling oil, though.”

“That’s too bad,” Peckard said. “Right now we need all we can get.”

Indeed, it was precisely this that was prompting Peckard’s trip to China. If he could convince them to block the Security Council vote, and begin shipment of “humanitarian” supplies, it would be a simple matter to smuggle in enough oil to see the Trust through. Unfortunately, the Chinese wanted a face-to-face meeting.

“Oil’s very profitable right now,” Quinn admitted, “but I’ve been burned once, so to speak.”

“I understand,” Peckard said and laughed. “In any event, I want to thank you again. You may not realize it, but your heroics have not only boosted morale here at home, but you’ve also gotten 13 percent of the American public to change their mind.”

“Glad to do my part,” Quinn said.

“Maybe when things settle down a bit,” Peckard said, “we can organize a parade.”

“I’m not too fond of parades,” Quinn said.

“Fair enough,” Peckard said, getting up. “It was a pleasure to meet you, Mr. Quinn. Thank you again.”

“Thank you,” Quinn said, standing up as well.

*That’s one tough man,* Peckard thought with amusement as Quinn left the office.

## Thirty-Six

“Thank you for the critique of our current policy,” the senator from Iowa said. “And now, Mr. O’Toole, perhaps you could offer this committee some constructive suggestions?”

“That’s why I’m here,” O’Toole said. The room laughed.

“First and most important,” O’Toole began, “the Black Administration must retake the moral initiative. Too many people, even in the First World countries, view the U.N. as the aggressor. After all, that’s how America’s own Independence Party platform describes it.

“What you need to do,” O’Toole continued, “is remind everyone of the facts behind the original founding of the so-called anarchist island. Contrary to its official reports, the Minerva Corporation under Eugene Callahan’s leadership did *not* acquire the original title through purely voluntary means.

“I should know,” O’Toole said, “since I oversaw the operations. And,” he said, holding up a stack of papers, “I’ve got the documents to prove it.”

\* \* \*

“That’s right, Senator Holland,” O’Toole said. “Do everything you can to provoke the Minervan firms; send in spies, flood them with counterfeit bank notes, you name it. Once they take the necessary countermeasures, it will be more and more clear that the islanders have a ‘State’ just like everyone else on this planet. The only difference is, the Minervan State is controlled by private individuals, rather than elected politicians.”

“This committee thanks you for your enlightening testimony, Mr. O’Toole,” the chairman said.

“And I thank you for the opportunity to set the record straight,” O’Toole said.

\* \* \*

“So what exactly was that all about?” Sheldon Marcus asked as they headed for the press conference.

“I just freed Danny,” O’Toole said, a wide smile on his face.

\* \* \*

“Linda,” Heather Durant said, “you’ve got to stop making excuses for these assholes. These rich kids come in and think they can do whatever they want. *Bullshit.*”

“I know,” Linda Graves said. “It’s just...I never actually said ‘no.’ What if there’s a trial?”

“Linnn-*da*,” Heather said. “How many times do we have to go through this? Didn’t you tell him all along that you wanted to wait?”

“Yes,” Linda admitted.

“Didn’t he get you piss drunk that night?”

“Yes.”

“Most important, did he ask your permission before he rammed his dick in you?”

“No,” Linda admitted.

“Well, I hate to tell you this kid-o,” Heather said, “but Dan O’Toole raped you.”

\* \* \*

Linda buried her face in the towel and stood in the shower, dripping, for several moments. She then patted herself down with the towel and wrapped it around her head. She slipped on a robe and walked into her small bedroom.

On her bed sat a woman dressed in black.

“Wh-who are you?” Linda stammered as the woman got up and approached her.

“Listen to me you lying *slut*,” the woman said as she snapped off her sunglasses. “You and I both know that Daniel O’Toole didn’t rape you. I don’t care how your sorority friends try to twist what happened, *you know that Daniel O’Toole did not rape you.* I know you were drunk and now you’re embarrassed and you just wish the whole thing had never happened, but *you know that Daniel O’Toole did not rape you.*”



“Wh-who are you?” Linda repeated.

“You listen to me,” the woman commanded. “You need to think about this before you continue. Let me tell you, it will *change your life FOREVER* if you become the sorority girl who charged a boy with date rape. Now if it ever happens to you, then by all means go ahead and endure it, but you do *NOT* want to be that girl if *it didn’t even happen.*”

“Who are you?” Linda asked.

“Remember,” the woman said as she put her glasses back on, “you and I both know full well that *Daniel O’Toole did not rape you.*”

## Thirty-Seven

“You have no respect for me, do you?” Novak asked, after the others had gone to bed.

“I have treated you with the utmost courtesy,” Mason replied.

“Plenty of thinkers have been Christian,” Novak said. “Are they all fools as well?”

“But they kept it separate!” Mason said. If Novak wanted to hear it, Mason wouldn’t spare him the truth. “I respect an Einstein because of his physics, not because of his theism.”

Novak just nodded and sipped from his tea. He could tell Mason had much more to say.

“And you were an atheist,” Mason began, “and then you *flipped!* It is understandable when someone is brought up with an illogical belief structure, and never really questions it. But you *embraced* it...as an adult!”

“I don’t suppose,” Novak said, smiling, “that it would matter if I told you that I don’t consider my beliefs to be illogical.”

“What are you talking about?!” Mason said. “Christianity is *founded* on its irrationality. That is one of its core beliefs.”

“I don’t recall Jesus ever commanding His disciples to abandon their reason,” Novak said. “In order to stress the limits of the human mind, yes, I grant you that some Christian writers have...”

“Do you believe in the Trinity?” Mason interrupted.

“Yes,” Novak answered.

“Q.E.D.,” Mason said.

Novak took another sip of tea. Mason gulped from his wine goblet.

“Are you an economist?” Novak asked.

“Yes,” Mason replied.

“Are you a mammal?” Novak asked.

“Yes,” Mason replied, sighing. “I see where you’re going with this, but the Trinity is based on ‘three is one.’ It’s not *supposed* to make sense.”

“It makes sense to me,” Novak said.

\* \* \*

“What I am saying,” Mason declared, gulping more wine, “is that your ‘God’ doesn’t even meet up with human standards of decency, let alone divine ones. And you expect me to worship Him?”

“By all means,” Novak said, still smiling, “please defend your assertion.”

Mason laughed. Didn’t Novak realize he had been *raised* as a Jew?

“How about punishing sins to the third and fourth generation?” Mason taunted. “If any human did that to a transgressor, it would be grossly unfair.”

“Dr. Mason,” Novak said, “imagine a couple: The man is an alcoholic who beats his wife, while the woman is a drug addict who sells her body to support her habit.”

“Okay,” Mason said, becoming interested.

“On the other hand,” Novak continued, “picture a couple where the man is a loving, caring companion, while the woman respects her mate as well as herself.”

“Okay,” Mason said.

“Now tell me, Dr. Mason, if we looked at the grandchildren and great-grandchildren of these respective couples, do you think we would find any differences?”

“Statistically,” Mason said with caution, “I imagine the latter would be better off.”

“Now then,” Novak said, “if someone were to tell the original couples this information, would that be ‘grossly unfair’? Or would that person merely be informing them of reality?”

Mason thought ahead a step in the argument. He knew Novak would simply come back and say that God cannot be blamed for including free will in His original design, and Mason knew from experience that *that* would be a quagmire.

“Fine,” Mason said, “sinners and their offspring can be punished. Doesn’t matter. You still have to explain why your loving, benevolent God torments His most faithful servants.”

“Can you be more specific?” Novak asked, without sarcasm.

Mason considered. Abraham would be inconclusive; Novak would surely argue that nothing had really happened to him and Isaac except a good fright. Suddenly Mason smiled.

“Job,” he said. “The story of Job has always revolted me. Here you have your all-powerful Lord God *bragging* to the devil, and killing innocent, righteous people just to win a bet.”

Novak felt a surge of anger but restrained it. It was one thing—indeed, it was a pity—when a person truly did not believe in our Heavenly Father. But it was quite another when a person *mocked* Him.

“Dr. Mason,” Novak said, choosing his words with care, “with all due respect, I think you are being very close-minded about this.”

Mason grunted.

“You continually view the matter from your perspective,” Novak continued. “Yes, if you assume that the idea of an omnipotent being is absurd, then no amount of evidence I offer will persuade. But surely if we are to debate, you must at least *entertain the notion* that there is a God, before judging whether the scriptures are compelling.”

Mason stared at Novak but said nothing.

“In this case,” Novak said gently, “let us take seriously the possibility that there is a God, as described in the book of Job. Now certainly He is not *boasting* to Satan. It would be far more accurate to say that He is merely *informing* Satan, to demonstrate that the Lord’s method of earning loyalty is far superior to the Enemy’s.”

“Even so,” Mason said, “He killed Job’s innocent children. I don’t care why He did it. He had no right.”

“He had no *right*??” Novak said. “The Lord may certainly undo what He has created. Is that not your own view of ownership?”

Mason snorted. *Now* Novak was trying to dabble in his own area!

“Actually,” Mason corrected, “I am a fairly harsh critic of Lockean ethics. But even the adamant natural law theorists don’t believe that parents can murder their ‘creations.’”

“But parents do not create their children,” Novak objected. “They use the resources that the Lord has placed in their custody.”

Mason grunted again. This poor Novak had certainly painted himself into a corner. A fine mind, too.

“And moreover,” Novak suddenly said, “a parent obviously doesn’t ‘own’ his children, because the parent himself would then be the property of the children’s *grandparents*, and so on. Notice that this regress does not occur for the true Creator.”

\* \* \*

“Yes, I believe in salvation through faith alone,” Novak admitted.

*Gotcha*, Mason thought.

“So then it is logically possible,” Mason declared, “for a person to be an unrepentant sinner—a murderer, a thief, a rapist—and yet pass through the pearly gates. I am sorry, Dr. Novak, but I find this ethical system simply abhorrent.”

Novak tried to restrain his surge of pride and contempt. Mason was incredibly intelligent—an absolute genius—but now the economist was dabbling in Novak’s area of expertise.

“Once again, Dr. Mason,” Novak lectured, “you aren’t taking your assumptions *seriously*. If someone truly accepts Jesus Christ as his personal savior, then the peace of our Lord descends upon him. In that condition, a man feels nothing but benevolence and compassion for his brothers and sisters. He desires only to help them, and in particular, to help them share in his incomparable joy.”

\* \* \*

“Okay,” Mason said, now quite drunk. He had been very close on several occasions, but Novak had always eluded him at the last moment. Now it was time for the kill.

“Do you believe,” Mason said, “that a system of political government is compatible with Christianity?”

Mason waited for Novak to say “yes,” thereby linking his religion to a collection of doctrines that Mason *knew* he could prove to be internally contradictory. Q.E.D.

“In a world where all are true Christians,” Novak said, “there would be no formal government.”

“Okay,” Mason said, still hoping to catch the wily theologian, “but in the present world, where there are sinners galore, is there a place for government?”

“I’m not sure I follow you,” Novak said. “Even true Christians are sinners. What I meant was that I can consistently be a Christian, even if other men around me set up violent institutions such as formal governments.”

“Wait a minute,” Mason said, forgetting his trap and becoming intrigued, “are you an anarchist?”

“In the political sense, yes. A formal government is a violent institution, and as a Christian I cannot condone the use of violence.”

“Awww,” Mason groaned, “you’re a *pacifist*?”

“Yes,” Novak said. “As a Christian I have no right to use violence against my brother.”

“What about Sodom and Gomorrah?” Mason asked. “What about the flood? Your *God* is certainly violent.”

“In the same way that earthquakes are violent, certainly,” Novak agreed. “But when it comes to His instructions for us, I believe His message is clear. When He Himself lived as a man, providing the perfect model for each of us, the Lord was anything but violent.”

“Well,” Mason chuckled, “it’s a good thing you believe in the afterlife, because a group of pacifists doesn’t stand a chance in this world.”

“Oh no?” Novak asked, amused.

“No,” Mason said. “There are certain people for whom violence—or at least its threat—is the only thing they understand. I myself, as well as a darling little boy, would’ve been dead had I played the lamb.”

“Ah, your famous mugging,” Novak said. Naturally, Mason had shared the story with Dupont, and it had quickly made the rounds of the small community.

“Yes, my famous mugging,” Mason said. He sensed that he had *finally* caught Novak. It was true, he hadn’t gotten the pure contradiction he had sought, but the implication of earthly misery was good enough.

“And why did you not simply follow our Lord’s command?” Novak asked. “Had you given your possessions to the young men, are you so sure they would have killed you?”

“It doesn’t matter,” Mason said, annoyed. “People are shot all the time. So don’t tell me there really aren’t criminals out there who will kill you, even *if* you give up your money.”

“I never denied that a Christian could be killed,” Novak said, trying to restrain laughter. It was amazing how *sloppy* otherwise brilliant people could be when arguing about the most important matters of all. “After all, the first Christian was murdered. My claim is that violence is not a legitimate tool, and that, contrary to popular belief, it is unnecessary. You simply need to take your own arguments against government to their logical conclusion.”

“Don’t lecture me about politics,” Mason said. “You tell me what you would do in a comparable situation. If some young *punk* is about to shoot you and a young boy, how would you get out of it without threatening him?”

Novak paused. He considered reiterating his earlier solution; he would have given the muggers his money. But he decided to try a more illustrative answer.

“I would have told him,” Novak said, “and with the same absolute conviction that you used, ‘Son, I can take away your pain.’”

“That wouldn’t work,” Mason instantly scoffed. “He was a criminal.”

\* \* \*

“Well,” Mason said, almost slurring his words, “I need to pass out. An interesting conversation.”

“Quite,” Novak said.

“Tell me something,” Mason said.

“Certainly,” Novak answered.

“You don’t respect me very much, do you?”

Novak smiled.

“Dr. Mason, I respect you tremendously. You have written wonderful things in your life.”

“But?” Mason asked.

“But,” Novak said, and lowered his eyes. “Dr. Mason, at any given time, by the process of elimination, there has to be the smartest man alive.”

Mason braced himself for a lecture on his vanity.

“Now, if that’s the case,” Novak said, “by implication, that means he is smarter than everyone he encounters.”

Novak paused.

“How utterly *sad*, then, if this man, rather than using his tremendous gifts to their full potential, instead spent the great bulk of his time...*deploring* the fact that everyone else is so stupid.”

Mason felt as if he had been punched in the stomach.

“You have an incredible mind, David,” Novak said. “Far beyond my own. It just...breaks my heart...the Enemy has convinced you to construct a prison with it.”

“You don’t know me,” Mason said.

“David,” Novak said, “look at what you *did*. You had a chance to ask one question from a being who far surpasses anything we can imagine. And what did you waste it on?”

“And what did *you* ask?” Mason said.

“I asked,” Novak said, “what it would take to get David Mason to join our community.”

\* \* \*



“Dear Father,” Novak prayed, “please forgive me for my pride and anger. Please give me another chance. Let Your Spirit fill me and guide me so that I may lead them back to You.”

Novak sighed as he knelt by his bed. Even though he understood the phenomenon quite clearly by now, it was still almost unbearably ironic that the very smartest and most skeptical of men were the ones most easily seduced by the Enemy.

## Thirty-Eight

“How many times do I have to tell you,” Ribald said, “Chairman Peckard is unavailable. I have assumed his duties, so you can tell me whatever it is you want to tell him.”

Black leaned back in his chair. Could one of the special ops boys have gotten a lucky break? Probably not. Maybe Peckard had just had a heart attack from the stress.

“Very well,” Black said. “I have a proposition for you.”

“Yes,” Ribald said, “*I’m listening.*”

“Allow our planes within 180 kilometers, and we’ll cut back our sorties to their previous levels.”

“*Why should I do that?*” Ribald asked.

“Oh come on, let’s drop the bullshit,” Black said. “After that ridiculous *Hopper* incident, I have to give my public something tangible. If I can say that we’ve gained twenty kilometers, that will work fine. Hell, I’d just *lie* about it if it weren’t for your own damn news agencies.”

“*Remind me again why I want to boost your popularity?*” Ribald asked.

“Damn it man, drop the act,” Black said. “You know you’re running out of fuel. Our heightened sorties have to be killing you. Pretend they’re not if you want, but I’m just trying to give us both a way out of this mess.”

“I’ll need to discuss it with my colleagues,” Ribald said.

“*Oh bullshit,*” Black shot back. “*Don’t tell me you don’t have the authority to change your pilots’ rules of engagement. What if we launched a massive bombing run? Would you have to consult them, too? No: you either take this deal or not. You’ve got sixty seconds to think it over, then it’s off the table.*”

Ribald quickly pulled out a sheet from a hanging file folder. At the current rate of consumption, the Trust only had twenty-three days’ worth of oil locked in with futures contracts. After that ran out, the Trust would need to purchase its fuel on the open

market. President Black's offer could save it millions of ounces. And what was an extra twenty kilometers?

"I can only control Trust aircraft," Ribald said. "There's a few independent militias, not to mention a whole host of hothead civilians. I can't stop them from attacking your planes."

*"I understand,"* Black said. *"Do we have a deal?"*

"Yes," Ribald said, "I suppose we do."

## PART VI

## Thirty-Nine

Matt sauntered back to the table, a wide smile on his face.

“I just took,” he announced, “the smoothest shit that has ever been moved by a bowel.”

“Glad to hear it,” Jim said.

“How many sheets of toilet paper?” Nook inquired.

“My friends,” Matt said, “in this case, wiping was a mere formality.”

\* \* \*

“All I’m saying,” Jim said, “is that I’d be embarrassed.”

“So let me get this straight,” Matt said. “My people take over half the world and put yours in chains, and I’m supposed to feel stupid because you’ve got more rhythm.”

“Yeah, slavery’s something you should really be proud of,” Jim said.

“Oh give me a break,” Matt said. “Everybody was fucked up back then. The Africans would’ve enslaved the Europeans if they could have. It was just too bad that we invented civilization while you were running around the jungle with a spear while your women were picking berries with their titties flopping out.”

“Oh so now the white man invented civilization?” Jim snorted.

“Basically,” Matt said. “That’s why even during Black Heritage Month we learn about that clever George Washington Carver and his sixty-four uses of the peanut. Sweet, man. We’ve got Einstein with his Nobel Prize for relativity, and you’re putting up a peanut scientist. And even there,” Matt added, “he was so white his parents *named* him after a slaveowner.”

“Actually,” Dan interjected, “I think Einstein won it for his work on Brownian motion.”

“I know that,” Matt said, “and *you* know that, but if I said ‘Brownian motion’ Jimmy here would think it a slur.”

“Don’t listen to him, Dan,” Tara said. “Matt subscribes to the philosophy of might makes right. I mean really, if women and minorities are so talented, how come they don’t own everything? Right Matt?”

“Are you shitting me?” Matt said. “Danny, don’t let your mother’s fantasy distort your vision of the world. You try go walking around a nice white neighborhood, then go to Compton and hang with the niggers—”

Matt caught himself, but too late.

“Oooh,” Tara whispered, sipping on her drink.

“What’d you say?” Jim asked, standing up.

“I said the people in Compton lead a very niggardly lifestyle,” Matt said. “I guess they didn’t teach you that word in P.S. 187.”

“What do you think, Tar baby?” Jim said. “I’m thinking Rocky III.”

“Fuck you,” Matt said. “It slipped, okay? Sue me.”

“I’m not gonna sue you,” Jim said. “I just want to hear a little of the Italian Stallion.”

“This is gay,” Matt protested. “How old are you?”

“Old enough to remember the scene where he calls for Adrian,” Jim said. “Let’s hear it.”

“Yo Adrian, I did it,” Matt mumbled.

“Get up and say it like you mean it,” Jim said.

“You just held your own against Apollo Creed,” Tara reminded him.

“Yo Adrian, I did it,” Matt said, louder this time.

“Hmm, I don’t know,” Jim said, walking over to Matt. “Danny, you tell me if you think he hits it.”

“Okay,” Dan said.

“Yo Adrian, I did it!” Matt yelled.

“Not bad,” Dan commented.

“Now for my Hulk Hogan,” Jim said.

Jim grabbed Matt’s shirt with his left hand and Matt’s crotch with his right. He lifted Matt up over his head, and held him parallel to the floor. As he talked, Jim slowly lifted Matt up and down a few inches.

“What do you say?” Jim said.

“Somebody catch me,” Matt mumbled.

Jim threw Matt at a neighboring table. The three customers had been monitoring the developing situation, and backed away with their drinks as Matt landed on their table.

\* \* \*

Matt and Dan sat at the bar. The official excuse was that they had gone to gamble a bit, but in reality Matt had just wanted to get away from the table to calm down.

“Do you know that’s the third time he’s pulled that shit?” Matt asked.

“Nah, that’s the first I’d seen of it,” Dan said. “How’s it work? The n-word sets off a Rocky scene?”

“It’s not always Rocky,” Matt said. “Last time the fucking bully held me against a wall by my neck and demanded to know where Princess Leia was.”

“Gentlemen,” the bartender said as he walked over, “the four ladies at that table want to buy your next round.”

Dan felt a rush of excitement. Matt looked over his shoulder at the girls.

“All pigs,” Matt declared. “Though you might want to consider the one on the right, what with the B.O.U.S.’s.”

“The what?” the bartender asked, obviously amused by Matt King.

“Breasts of unusual size,” Dan explained.

“Look,” Matt said, “if we decline the drinks, does that mean we don’t have to talk to them? I already had bacon this morning.”

“Oh come on now,” the bartender said, chuckling. “Not too many guys get drinks from strange women.”

“Not the adjective I would have chosen,” Matt said. “Ahh shit.”

Two of the girls headed toward Matt and Dan. Although he would never admit so, Dan thought one of them was quite cute.

“What’s two hunky guys like you doing in a casino like—” the cute girl started to ask.

Matt grabbed the plastic sword out of his glass and spun on his stool to face the girls.

“Thunder,” he said, pointing the sword to his left. “Thunder,” he repeated, pointing it to his right. “Thunder,” he said, now pointing the sword straight up. “Thunder-thighs...HOOOOs!”

As Matt raised his arms and yelled, he fell backwards off his stool and spilled onto the floor. The girls rushed to help him.

“Are you all right?” the cute one asked.

Dan felt sick to his stomach. Matt did nothing but mock girls, and for some reason they adored him.

\* \* \*

“Glad to see you back, Mr. Balboa,” Nook said as Matt and Dan returned to the large table.

“Don’t flatter yourself,” Matt said. “Dan and I are just stalking that hottie over there. Sure, we’ll make like we’re friends with you clowns, but I just want you to know I sit here only for the view it affords of her ass.”

“So Matthew,” Tara said, “Jack tells me you’re not returning to active duty.”

“Fuck no,” Matt said. “There’s too many girls I have yet to bang for me to be hijacking battleships.”

“It wasn’t a battleship,” Quinn said.

“It was when I told the story to two Swedish girls last night,” Matt said. “Seriously, have you guys tried that out? We’re actually famous.”

“It won’t last,” Quinn said.

“Ooh, ooh,” Matt said, nudging Dan. “Good news, she smokes!”

Dan looked to see the swimsuit model taking a drag from a cigarette.

“Why is that good news?” Nook asked. “She won’t eat as much when you take her out?”

“No, dipshit,” Matt said. “If she’s a smoker, it means she’s willing to degrade her body for immediate pleasure. Everything I want in a woman.”



Tara whispered something to Jim. He started laughing.

“Something you want to share with the class?” Matt demanded.

Tara shook her head no.

“What, you rip on me and can’t even say it to my face?” Matt asked.

“All I said was,” Tara explained, “that I thought the reason you liked a girl who smokes is that she’s willing to suck on skinny white rods.”

\* \* \*

“Now that we’re good and drunk,” Matt said, “I want you to tell me what Nook said to you at that restaurant. I’ve been trying to figure out for *decades* how the hell he does it. I’m like fucking Mr. McGee, going up to people after the fact. ‘Didn’t anybody hear what he said? For the love of God, didn’t anyone *hear it?*’”

“Why don’t you ask him?” Tara said.

“Huh, no shit,” Matt said, “I never thought of that before. Because he won’t tell me, that’s why. So how bout Aunt Tara entertains us all with a story about what Chris Nook said to her when he tried to break her up.”

“Okay Matthew,” Tara said, “it all started when Peter left the table to receive a phone call.”

Matt’s eyes widened. He couldn’t believe she was actually going to tell him.

“Well, as soon as Peter left,” Tara continued, “Chris came in and sat at the table. But he didn’t call himself Chris. Anyway, he says, ‘Miss McClare, I have something to tell you about the man you’re dating.’”

Matt leaned forward. He was *finally* going to learn the Cockblock Jock’s secret!

“And then he says, ‘Are you familiar with Matt King?’”

Matt sat back. *What the hell?* There were plenty of girls who hadn’t known Matt, and yet Nook had always been able to work his magic...

*Of course! He says something different every time!*

“So I said yes, I know Matt King,” Tara continued. “I actually still thought you were yummy at the time. I didn’t know what a meanie you really were.”

Tara stopped her tale to hug her knees to her chest and turn away from the table.

“Yeah yeah, that’s great Tara,” Matt said. “You can start pouting and give me a stinger. B.F.D. honey, it’s nothing but a biological reaction. If you throw pepper in my face I’ll start sneezing too. Finish the goddamn story.”

“Well,” Tara said, sliding her legs back down, “Chris says it’s good that I know Matt King, and then pulls out...a nude photo of you.”

Matt was flabbergasted. It was certainly possible for Nook to have photos of him...the two had made countless amateur videos in their younger days.

“So of course,” Tara said, blushing, “I was a little worked up by this point. Then Chris tells me to focus on the genitals.”

“Stop,” Matt said, “let me digest.”

Matt had often toyed with the idea that his relatively small penis was actually a turn-on to women. He conjectured that his intimidating façade made the girls relieved to discover that he didn’t actually have the horse cock that one might have inferred from his behavior. So what was Nook’s angle? Would he tell Tara that Matt was interested, and get her to drop O’Toole? It seemed implausible, but then again, maybe Matt was even sexier than he realized?

“You may proceed,” Matt said.

“Well,” Tara said, “naturally I analyzed the photo with great enthusiasm. When I had finished, Chris said, ‘I know this may come as a shock to you, Miss McClare, but I can’t stand by and do nothing.’”

“Yes??” Matt said when Tara paused.

“Miss McClare,” Tara said, “I have reason to believe that Peter O’Toole’s dick is even smaller than Matt King’s.”

The table was silent for almost three seconds.

“Ohhh nooo!” Nook yelled, laughing uncontrollably.

“That’s my girl,” Jim said.

Matt fumed. It wasn’t the insult that pissed him off, but the fact that she had actually led him to believe she’d tell the real story. *And that little bitch knows it, too.*

“Let’s go Dan,” Matt said, standing up. “No wonder the kid’s all fucked up with girls, with a psycho for you as a mom.”

As they walked away from the table, Matt said, “I wonder if she’d still have that shit-eating grin if I bent her over the bar.”

“Again,” Dan protested, “my mom.”

“I’m sorry Dan,” Matt said, “but she pulls a stunt like that? I’m already your father, might as well make it official. You want a brother or a sister? I can aim left or right.”

Dan said nothing as they walked.

“Hey, you know what?” Matt said, stopping. “You go on ahead. I’ll meet you at the blackjack tables.”

“What, do you have to take another shit?” Dan asked. “Don’t forget about me.”

“Sure thing, don’t worry about it,” Matt said, waving him away.

After Dan had turned the corner, Matt headed back to the table. Tara looked up as he approached.

“You know what, Tara?” Matt said. “You really suck as a human being. You get away with your shit because you’re hot and rich, but I just want you to know that you *suck* as a human being. Sure, I’m an asshole, but at least I have boundaries. You just say whatever the hell pops into your head. So I just want you to know that you *suck*. That’s why you don’t have any girlfriends, because they’re not blinded by your looks so they know how much of a bitch you are.”

“Come here, Matthew,” Tara said.

“Fuck no,” Matt said, and turned away.

“Matthew, come here,” Tara said.

“Screw you,” Matt said, and started walking away from the table.

Tara got up and ran to catch him.

“Oh tut tut Matthew,” she said, taking his left arm. “I need a drink but I don’t have an escort. I wouldn’t want some scary fellow to hit on me.”

Matt couldn’t resist. He allowed Tara to steer him to the bar.

“Bartender,” she said, “this gorgeous gentleman will have a Jack and coke, and I’ll need a Bloody Mary.”

“Coming right up,” the man said.

“Were you really upset at my story?” Tara asked.

“Hell yes,” Matt said. “I really want to know what he says to girls.”

“Well,” Tara said, “I’m not sure it would be ethical for me to divulge his trade secret.”

“Yeah yeah,” Matt said, picking up his new drink from the bar.

Tara took a single sip from her drink and then threw it in Matt’s face.

“What the fuck?!” Matt yelled.

“You listen to me you little *shit*,” Tara said. “*Nobody* talks to me like that. Your problem, Mr. King, is that you don’t even know what it is to care about someone—not even yourself. And just so you know, the only reason I even *let* you associate with my son is so he sees first-hand how *bankrupt* your lifestyle is.”

Tara turned and walked away.

“Can I get a fuckin towel here?” Matt asked.

As the bartender scrambled for a towel, Matt noticed three men at the bar staring. They had obviously been quite fascinated by the scene. Matt gestured at the dipshit bartender and shrugged his shoulders. The men smiled.

“Thanks,” Matt said when he was handed the towel. After wiping his face, he tried his best to clean off his shirt. *Couldn’t have been gin*, he thought.

Matt noticed that the three men were still stealing glances at him. He leaned in to talk confidentially with them.

“So last night was the first time me and the lady...I stuck it in her poop chute. And then I just talked soooo dirrrrrty.”

The men had wide eyes and open mouths by this point.

“And of course she’s loving it, begging me for more,” Matt said. “Now all of a sudden today she’s all, ‘You don’t love me anymore. You never used to stick it in my butt.’”

The men laughed.

“Ain’t that always how it is, the first time you ride the caboose with a woman?” Matt asked.

The men agreed wholeheartedly, even though none of them had ever engaged in anal sex.

“I’ll grant you,” Matt conceded, “she’s entitled to a little resentment; if someone stuck a chub up *my* ass, I’d be a bit peeved myself.”

The men endorsed Matt’s sympathetic analysis.

“But a drink in my face?” Matt asked.

“That’s bullshit,” one of the men finally spoke.

“And you say she loved it?” another asked, emboldened by his friend.

“Fuckin A she loved it,” Matt said. “And you, my friend, have just hit the nail on the head. What are you guys drinkin?”

“Nah nah,” they protested. “We’re buying.”

“Whoa, fellows,” Matt said. “The last drink someone bought me ended up on my shirt. *I’m* buying.”

After placing their order, one of the men dared, “So are you two an item?”

The man was simply curious; he knew a beautiful redhead like that wouldn’t give him the time of day.

“Well ain’t this guy bold,” Matt proclaimed, looking at the other two. “Here I am, buying him a drink, dripping in tomato juice, and he’s trying to fuck my date.”

The other men laughed hysterically while the first man apologized profusely.

*These guys would blow me*, Matt realized.

## Forty

“So that’s where we stand,” Peckard said to the other Trust board members. “With their stepped up patrols, we run out of fuel reserves in fifteen days if we do nothing.”

Ribald stared at the table in front of him. He couldn’t bring himself to look at Peckard.

“And the thing with China...?” Kennedy hoped.

“The thing with China,” Peckard said, “fell through when the U.S. fleet gained twenty-five kilometers. My contacts thought the deal would work when we were locked in a stalemate, but they don’t want to back a loser.”

“So what are our options?” someone asked.

“Well,” Peckard said, “we could knock out another wave of satellites. Of course, this time it’s mostly commercial ones that the U.S. has requisitioned, so it won’t fly as well in the courts.”

“That won’t buy us much,” Brady said. “With so many aircraft and as close as they are, they can pretty well seal us off without satellites.”

“I was thinking,” Peckard said, “we *could* just ground our jets, and tell the White House what we’re doing. Feynman tells me that the Trust is technically only liable for the taxes that would have to be paid should an outside government conquer the island. We wouldn’t have to indemnify policyholders for the loss in market value.”

Peckard could tell from the men’s faces that this would not pass a vote.

“Gentlemen, relax,” Peckard said, “I’m just brainstorming here. We’ve *also* got the EMP wildcard...”

The men were suddenly alert. Months ago, Peckard had sought and gained their approval for research into a low-yield nuclear device. Its electromagnetic pulse (EMP) could disrupt unprotected electronics, and would be capable of temporarily crippling an entire carrier group.

“Is it ready?” Ribald asked.

“Yes, it passed the final tests while I was away,” Peckard lied. The tests had actually been completed two weeks earlier.

“I’ve also arranged for several small tankers to position themselves right here,” Peckard said, pointing to a wall map. “If we take out a carrier, we can bring in another two months’ of oil while the U.S. reestablishes its perimeter.”

“I never heard about the tankers,” Brady objected. “Were you going to go ahead with your plan without telling us?”

“I’m telling you right now,” Peckard said. “Whatever we do, we’ll need to get tankers in here. I just saved us the time of waiting for them to move into position.”

“And I suppose you’ve got the subs ready, too?” Brady asked.

“Of course,” Peckard said. “It doesn’t take much; they just need to move in and fire their torpedoes after the EMP blast. The crews haven’t gotten their orders yet; I don’t want to spill the beans.”

“And you don’t know if we’ll even vote with you,” Brady reminded him.

“Of course,” Peckard said with a smile. “I just want to give you gentlemen as many options as possible.”

“And you’re sure this is legal?” someone asked.

“It’s perfectly legal,” Feynman answered. “We have to allow surprise inspections of our labs, and our reinsurance premiums are astronomical because of the enriched uranium, but yes, it’s legal. If the EMP knocks out a fishing boat’s radio, we’re liable for that, of course. But our subs have every right to sink a blockading U.S. carrier off our coast.”

“And we’re sure about the ABM satellites?” Ribald asked.

“Absolutely,” Maynard answered. “Our lasers will knock out any ICBMs the U.S. might launch.”

“What about submarine launches?” Brady asked.

“Our intelligence indicates that there are at most three subs with nuclear warheads in our waters,” Peckard answered. “Our Defenders can take care of whatever they might fire.”

“And if they deploy their entire fleet?” Brady pressed. “I don’t like the idea of nuclear missiles being launched at us from point blank range.”

“I’ve already placed the orders for more minelayers and sub nets,” Peckard said. “We’ll have plenty of time to prepare if the U.S. sends more submarines.”

“I appreciate your concerns,” Peckard said after a few moments of silence. “But gentlemen, we’re not even ‘nuking’ them. All we’re doing is knocking out their electronics so we can sneak a few conventional torpedoes past their defenses. After it’s done, we immediately go on the air and tell the U.S. to pull back its remaining ships to 250 kilometers, or else we take out an additional carrier every twenty-four hours. Black will *obviously* do so, and in the meantime we’ll replenish our supplies. The world will see that we can’t be beaten, and we can negotiate a gradual withdrawal.”

*That’s not going to happen at all,* Brady thought.



## Forty-One

“Hey, do you know if Jennifer Heyden is working tonight?” Matt asked the pretty waitress as she brought his drink.

“Sorry, don’t know her,” she replied.

Matt gulped from his beer. He had done nothing but drink and snort since the others had left the night before.

“So what’s up with this blockade?” the comic asked from the stage. “I mean, I can buy a lobster dinner, but I can’t afford a table to eat it off of.”

A few people chuckled. Matt could not *believe* the shit that passed for funny these days.

“And what’s the deal with Steven Peckard?” the comic asked. “Do you guys trust this cat? I keep waiting for him to start breeding mutant lobsters.”

“We should send you over to hurt their morale,” Matt yelled. A few people laughed.

“Uh oh, we’ve got a heckler,” the comic announced.

“Sure ain’t got *talent*,” Matt informed him.

“You don’t think I’m funny?” the comic asked, stalling. It was hard to see with the glare, but unfortunately the heckler appeared quite good-looking.

“I think you fucking *suck*,” Matt said.

“You kiss your mother with that mouth?” the comic asked.

“Yeah...and I sodomize yours with this *dick*,” Matt yelled, squeezing his crotch. The comic obviously had no idea who he was dealing with. The entire crowd now faced Matt.

“I suppose you think you can come up here and do a better job?” the comic asked.

Matt looked over the staring crowd. Even though he tried to convince himself that they would enjoy his commentary much more than the joker currently up there, he still felt petrified. *Fuck it.*

*Just think Sinatra*, Matt thought as he headed for the stage.

\* \* \*

“So where’s your Dad been?” Jim asked as he and Dan stepped onto the new ship, the *Emily St. Pierre*.

“He hasn’t left the apartment since he got back from the States,” Dan answered. “He’s afraid he’ll get lynched.”

“Yeah,” Jim said. “Well, I guess he had to do it for you.”

“No he didn’t,” Dan said. “Linda—that’s the girl—dropped the charge on her own. And I could’ve gotten out of the country the same way Matt did. I don’t know *what* the hell he was thinking.”

“Oh,” Jim said. “So what are you up to now?”

“I don’t know,” Dan said. “I wanna get the hell away from home, that’s for sure.”

“I hear ya,” Jim said. “Heh, look at that.”

Jim pulled back a loose panel from the wall.

“I bet it would be real easy for a stowaway to hide in there,” he commented.

Jim slid the panel back, and he and Dan continued their tour.

\* \* \*

The audience roared, including the scheduled comic. Some even had tears streaming down their cheeks. *I knew I could do this shit. Just give me a fuckin chance.*

“Mister,” Matt suddenly said to a man in the front row. “Could you *please* get your date to stop undressing me with her eyes? There’s a draft up here.”

As the crowd laughed, Matt’s mind raced ahead to what he would say *after* the next impressions. He knew that during the bit, he wouldn’t be able to think.

“So that was Madden announcing a golf tournament,” Matt reminded the crowd. He didn’t want to overestimate them. “Now here’s two golf announcers doing the color commentary at the Superbowl...”

## Forty-Two

President Anthony Black hurled his coffee mug at the wall. Did they think he wouldn't have the balls to do it?

Black calmed himself and sat back at his desk. Especially after the briefing, Black was sure that there was simply no other option. Still, killing anywhere from 500,000 to two million people was not something done lightly. Black didn't care about the whining marchers, who would howl no matter *what* he did, but he still had posterity to consider.

The first point was obvious: The Minervans had put the nuclear card on the table. So he clearly had the *right* to retaliate in kind. Now it was just a matter of *prudence*. What would best advance the cause of mankind?

It seemed to Black that the conflict boiled down to a clash of two irreconcilable systems. The fact that things had come to this, less than two decades after the island's founding, proved that the so-called anarchists could not exist side-by-side with democratic republics.

So the question was, which system was better? Black was a man who always trusted experience rather than theories. And in practice, the United States and the countries like her certainly did much better than the places in the world without strong governments.

Black caught himself. He realized that he had been trying to play god. No, it wasn't his business to decide which system was better. Just like a good attorney always argues for his client, so too Black realized that he had to give the system of constitutional government the fairest possible hearing. If it could be beaten, even when its military had its hands untied, then so be it.

Maybe, decades down the road, the anarchists would be proven right. Until then, Black couldn't abandon his responsibility to defend the security of the American people. As his generals had rightly stressed, the U.S. could not ignore such a flagrant attack on its forces. To do so would give hope to enemies the world over, and inspire countless more attacks.

President Anthony Black took a deep breath. He realized with some amusement that he was now the only other man in human history to understand what Harry Truman had endured.

## Forty-Three

“Hey Jack,” Dan said to Quinn.

“What the hell...” Quinn said.

“There was a loose wall panel,” Dan explained.

“Well,” Quinn said, “I’m sorry kid, but I’ve got to turn around. Your mom would kill me if I took you on this run.”

\* \* \*

“A hit,” the operator announced. Yet another incoming missile had been successfully intercepted at sea.

“How long till our jets can fire?” Peckard asked. A huge mass of U.S. aircraft, including heavy bombers and supporting fighters, was headed for Minerva. Peckard had scrambled some of the Trust’s fighters to meet them.

“Two minutes,” another technician answered.

“What the hell?” the technician said. “Sir, come look at this.”

Peckard jogged over to the station. On the display, the group of fifty-two dots were suddenly multiplying.

“What’s going on?” Peckard demanded. “Are they dropping foil?”

“No sir,” an analyst answered. “Those signatures cross-check on infrared as well as radar. We’re getting a visual now...”

An enhanced satellite photo slowly filled an overhead screen.

“Oh no,” someone whispered.

The U.S. warplanes were surrounded by hundreds of flying drones.

“Transfer control to Command Post Two,” Peckard ordered. The alternate headquarters was located several kilometers offshore. “Everybody get down to the bunker.”

As his employees hurried into the elevator, Peckard opened the door to the stairwell. He wanted to watch the incoming bombers from the roof.

\* \* \*

O'Toole and Tara could see the explosions on the horizon. Gradually, the growing black cloud turned into distinct aircraft. It seemed as if they were headed straight for the couple.

O'Toole wrapped his arms around Tara's waist from behind.

"I love you," he whispered into her ear.

\* \* \*

"Mr. President," General Merton pleaded, "we lost over seventy pilots. We can't afford another run."

"*Damnit Merton,*" Black exploded. "*We can't sit back with the job half done! There's no telling what those crazy bastards will pull if we don't wipe them out while we still can!*"

Merton took a deep breath.

"Mr. President," he said, "in my capacity as a soldier in the executive branch, I cannot start a war without a formal declaration from the Congress. I believe that launching a second nuclear strike at this time would be an act of war, and hence unconstitutional. In good conscience, I cannot obey your order."

## Epilogue

“I guess the Chinese worked out a ceasefire,” Quinn said from behind. Dan continued to stare at the smoking island from the deck of the *Emily St. Pierre*.

“That’s good,” Dan finally said, then headed back inside the ship. Quinn followed him.

“Look, Danny,” he said, “I’d love to take you with me, but...”

“But what?” Dan said. “I’ve got no family to go back to.”

“Probably not,” Quinn said. “But it’s like this—before, you were running away from your family. But now...”

“Yeah?” Dan asked.

“Now, you’d be running away from yourself.”

Dan grunted and went back outside to the deck.

Jim came in from another room.

“I heard what you said,” Jim said. “That was some pretty deep stuff.”

“Thanks,” Quinn said and snorted. “Poor kid.”

“He’ll be all right,” Jim said. “You’ll see.”

## **A Word from the Author**

I hope you enjoyed this rough cut of *Minerva*. For your convenience, the entire draft is available in PDF form at Strike the Root. Please let your friends and acquaintances know about it if they might be interested.

And now down to business: If any person or group PayPal's me an advance of \$50,000, then I will sign a contract promising to deliver the full-length sequel to *Minerva* within three years from the date of initial payment. Upon delivery of the final manuscript, I will receive an additional \$450,000. Included with the manuscript will be all rights to the sequel, as well as a promise by me to discuss the sequel with no one except those I may consult for technical/stylistic suggestions.

Bob Murphy

April 2004