THE THIRD REVOLUTION IV:



THE WARLORD

GREGORY KAY

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By

Gregory Kay

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AWKNOWLEDGMETS

First, I thank God, the Great Author of all things.

On an earthly level, I'd like to thank my wife, who suggested I write the first book in this series twelve years ago, Jerry and Sam for the technical advice, and Kathy, my long-time friend and latest co-conspirator-turned editor. Last but not least, I'd like to thank the fans of this series for their constant encouragement.

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DEDICATION

1.1.1.1.1.1.

1.1.1.1.1.2. *To every true Southerner in the traditional sense of the word, who know who he is and what he is, and knows that some ends do, in fact, justify the means.*

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It had been a year since General Frank Gore was wounded and became a father, since Field Marshal Jonathon Edge returned with a fiancée and international help, and since US Admiral Hardy and General Lannigan secretly threw in their lot with the Confederate Cause, covertly funneling information to the Rebels even as they desperately sought a way that would end the conflict. And still the war ground on, crushing men and women and children and dreams between its bloody millstones.

The conflict had escalated, and gotten worse instead of better, as the desperation of both armies increased. Soldiers on both sides woke up screaming at night, their nightmares often not of things that had been done to them, but things they had done to others: things that would have been the stuff of horror movies in a normal world that few could now remember without effort. One side would strike, then the other would hit back harder in revenge, back and forth, with each act upping the ante until the escalating butcher's bill was one that could never be paid in full.

The Northern states never fully recovered their power grid, although they managed to destroy most of the South's system as well; every night, tens of millions sat in the cold and dark. Riots regularly tore the cities above the Mason-Dixon, almost as violent as the war raging below it. With the infrastructure collapse, hunger and its companion, disease, began taking their own toll in lives. Seeing the weakness of the United States, the other nations circling like vultures seeking opportunity became more and more blatant in their attentions.

Hawaii was gone now. Knowing they couldn't fight both the Confederates and the Chinese who intended to take it, as a face-saving measure and under pressure from Congress, President Plants declared the island chain an independent nation, turned it over to the native nationalists, and pulled the US military forces out to the mainland, where they were needed to fight the Southerners. Of course, large numbers of soldiers, sailors, airmen and marines were Southerners as well, and not a few of them deserted to join their own people in their struggle for freedom or worked covertly for it within the system.

Both sides knew things couldn't go on like this forever, or even much longer, before both were so weakened they would suffer the same fate as Hawaii. One side figured out what to do about it, and was willing to risk it all to bring it to an end. Yet, one war can easily morph into another, patriotism can change into treason, and even total victory doesn't mean the fighting is over; often as not, it's just another blood-filled footprint among many on the road of history...the road to destiny.

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PART I

END GAME

"*This is what we fight for; in the end, when it all comes down to it, this is what we've always fought for. Not for me, not for a piece of cloth, or a piece of ground, or for some kind of political philosophy; none of this means anything next to this! This is our Cause! This has always been our Cause! We must secure a future for this child, and for every child like her in this Confederacy of ours, no matter what it costs, and no matter what we have to do to make it happen! This end is worth the means – any means!"* ~ Frank Gore

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Confederate Army Provisional Order Number: 246
Location: South Carolina Theater
Subject: Reorganization of the 1st Columbia Irregulars
To: Colonel Charles Carnes

Upon receipt of this order, you will see to the merging and reorganization of the surviving members of the 1st Columbia Irregulars with the members of Lieutenant Harrison's independently operating Columbia squad, along with any other members of the Confederate Army Provisional forces in South Carolina as chosen by the command of this force and subject to your approval, into a new unit, the 1st South Carolina Irregulars.

This unit will begin at approximately company strength with the intention of eventually forming a full battalion. It will serve as an elite corps, functioning as the Confederate Army Provisional's Special Operational Forces in this state, as well as providing security for me and my headquarters there.

The organization of the unit shall be as follows.

Commander: Major Ronald Hodges
Executive Officer: Captain Joel Harrison (to be promoted to fill that role; see attached order)
1st Company Commander: 1st Lieutenant Daniel Drucci
2nd Company Commander: 1st Lieutenant Casey Graham
3rd Company Commander: 1st Lieutenant Douglas Long
4th Company Commander: 1st Lieutenant Ralph Steiner

If you have any questions or additional suggestions as to the structure, contact me immediately; otherwise, you will be working with Major Hodges.

Signed: General Franklin Gore,
Confederate Army Provisional

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DAY 713
CHAPTER 1

South Carolina

Lieutenant Thomas Richardson – "Tommy" to his friends – looked through the darkness at Donna Waddell asleep beside him, and felt even worse than before. Her soft, purring snore gave no indication that she had cried herself to sleep, which was not that unusual, since she had done it more nights than not, ever since…

Damn it to Hell!

Raising his hand – more properly, he supposed, his wrists – to eye level, he glared furiously at them. His arms worked fine, but his hands flopped and dangled uselessly at their ends, muscles atrophied and as limp as filleted fish.

And that isn't the worst of it!

What had been done to him was worse. Even though he had lost the use of only his hands and walked with a limp, he would have happily traded places with the one-eyed triple amputee Colonel Carnes in order to avoid being raped; he would have died in order to prevent that, but that he tried and failed to do so was of no consequence in his own mind.

They might as well have cut my balls off!

His eyes narrowing, he glared at the crippled appendages hanging from his wrists, and knew they might as well have cut his hands off too. It would have been better; at least he could have gotten some articulated hooks so he could do something besides being completely helpless. He had actually asked their nurse-turned-acting-doctor, Carla Dover, to amputate them so he could do just that, but she had refused and Frank had backed her, insisting that he be patient and wait. *Wait for what?* With the war, there would be no chance of the surgery he needed, and it was a conflict with no end in sight.

His eyes pulled back to his fiancée, who had spent the last year taking care of him, buttoning his shirts, doing the things he could no longer do for himself. Looking at the woman he loved but could no longer bring himself to make love to, he felt even more miserable.

She doesn't deserve this!

He finally decided it was time; he'd done all he could, and couldn't see the point in dragging out what had to be done any longer. Not tonight, not beside her – she'd been through more than enough already. Tomorrow, or maybe the next day, whenever he got the chance; he would wait until someone set a loaded long gun down where he could get to it. That, at least, he figured he could do. He would brace between his knees and drop a limp finger on the trigger. One shot would be all he'd need.

Diary of Cynthia Dover

Dear Diary:

It's funny how things change sometimes, how people change. Not funny like to laugh at; there isn't that much to laugh about anymore, even though we all try.

Still, it's been a good time lately, at least for me anyway. Mom's alive, and it's really great to have her here acting as the closest thing to a doctor Headquarters Company has, but it's still one more person I have to worry about, one more something could happen to. But, considering where she was, this is definitely for the best. At least I have her to talk to again; I really missed that.

Sammie's never said so, but she's glad to have Frank here too. It's too bad he had to get wounded and

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almost killed to do it, but it got him back with us to recover, and be with his wife and daughter, although we all know it won't last. He finally recovered fully a few months ago, and since he's well again now, he'll be in the thick of it, sooner or later – probably sooner. He likes to lead from the front.

Frank is scary sometimes. Not like I'm afraid of him or anything, nothing like that; he'd be more likely to die for us than hurt one of us. No, it's just that he's gotten so hard. I guess you've got to expect that, after everything that's happened to him, and to the people he cares about. In some ways he's even harder than Field Marshal Edge, who is about the hardest guy I ever met, and even he's mellowed out a lot since he came home with Vika. Still, I worry about Frank. In seventh grade, I had to read DOCTOR JEKYLL AND MISTER HYDE, and he's got a lot like that. It's like he's got two different people in there; one kind and nice and the other a flat-out stone killer. Somebody skins a knee in training and he's there to help, then a minute later he'll give the orders that will result in dozens or hundreds of people dying. What scares me is that Hyde seems to be coming out more and more, and if it wasn't for Sammie and little Linda, I'm afraid it would take over completely. That would be a loss for us all.

The reason it scares me so much is that's what almost happened to me, so I know what it's like. I guess if it wasn't for Mom being found and for…well, I won't say who, not right now, but if not for them, I would be Ms. Hyde. I came close, but managed to save at least a little piece of my own humanity. I can still fight and kill when I have to, and while I don't have any real regrets about doing it, I don't enjoy it anymore…well, I never enjoyed it, I guess; maybe it's more like I just don't need it anymore. I'll have to remember to pray for Frank after I finish writing this evening, that he might save some of his own humanity. I hope so, because I know he prayed for me for the same reason.

Anyway, Mr. Hyde or not, I'm still really glad to have him back. Not only is he like the ultimate big brother, but with him here, I've been temporarily reassigned. Instead of guarding Sammie 24-7, I'm working mostly with Mike. I still take care of her in designing the web articles and presentations, of course, but I spend most of my time helping him out with the intelligence stuff. It's interesting, and he and I have something in common; we both lost the same someone that we cared so much about. Kerrie's death hurt Mike very deeply, and it's like it cut a big piece out of his heart, until he's even harder than Frank or Field Marshal Edge, if that's possible. He goes at this war with a vengeance now, because, for him, that's exactly what it is. He's trying to wash away what happened to Kerrie in blood, but that won't work; I know, because I've tried it myself after what was done to me. Unlike Frank, though, he doesn't have anybody, and I'm really worried about him. In fact, I'm not sleepy yet, and he never seems to sleep, so I think I'll go down and see if he needs anything. He's got so much work, because there's danger everywhere. The really scary part is not all that danger is from the enemy out there; some of it's from the traitors in our own ranks…

Phone Conversation

"*I sent the reward money back to you; it's been transferred to the specified account. I acted in good faith, even though you were the ones who had him on that mountaintop and let him get away.*"

"*There was no 'good faith' about it; the reward was for information leading to Gore's capture or death. Neither of those things happened.*"

"*That wasn't my fault!*"

"*If we thought it was, we would have already leaked your name to the Confederates and let them deal with you. Now we have another job for you. You're to keep us posted on everything you see and hear.*"

"*What's in it for me?*"

"*Besides us not giving your name to your buddies, and letting them know how you betrayed them, you mean?*"

"*But...*"

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"*Relax; you're safe as long as you play ball with us. And just to show our 'good faith,' we'll be transferring back one million of what you returned to us, plus another million for every victory you can hand us. Finally, once this crisis is over, you'll be placed in charge of your state under the auspices of the military government while we root out every last vestige of rebellion, once and for all. I'm sure you can milk a lot more cash out of that. And, of course, the reward for Edge, the Gores, and the others still stands, so any assistance you can give us there would also be to your financial benefit. You just might be a billionaire before it's all over.*"

"*I'll do it.*"

"*I know. We'll keep in touch.*"

"I'll see that bet, and I'll raise by two," General Frank Gore said, with a hard, cold expression in his gray eyes.

You sometimes had to look closely to see your cards by candlelight on a dark November night in South Carolina, but it was usually all they had, so it had to do. There was little power anywhere, and almost none in the South, particularly in the rural areas; many gas stations had switched to hand pumps in order to stay open. Still, people had to have their recreation, and took it where they could get it, even in a war zone. Most of the power from the portable or homemade wind, solar, or even bicycle-powered generators went to drive the computers so necessary to their struggle, so, with seldom enough electricity to run TVs and radios for recreation rather than information gathering, if the guerrillas wanted to do more than sit around and shoot the breeze, play a little music, or read and reread the limited stock of books in the library of whatever safe house they happened to be in, they played cards. Appropriate, really, because in cards, as in war, or in life, you played the hand you were dealt.

Colonel Samantha Gore managed to suppress the urge to shake her head ruefully. Playing the hand you were dealt in poker with her husband Frank – second in command over the entire Confederate Army Provisional – and their friend and comrade, South Carolina Councilman Sam Wirtz, meant getting an education...big time!

She supposed that was why they were generally the only players in this particular game; the rest of headquarters company either didn't care for cards, had other interests, or, more likely, just didn't like losing. A few guests got in the game on occasion, but most preferred to avoid the action, with the exception of a few who were as hardcore as Frank and Sam: visiting guerrilla officers from other states, a few of the Russian advisors, and Captain Dragan Jelasic – one of their handful of vengeful "unofficial" Serbian volunteers with a score of their own to settle over the US theft of Kosovo.

As for Samantha, she wasn't hardcore when it came to poker, but just too stubborn to quit. Besides, it gave her a chance to spend more time doing something with her husband that didn't actually involve people dying.

"I'll see," she said, sliding a pair of improvised chips made out of painted beer bottle caps with numbers inked on them across the table.

I must be a glutton for punishment!

Frank's bodyguard, the giant biker Billy Sprouse, the fourth member of the evening poker quartet, wasn't even doing as well as she was, but the irrepressible man enjoyed it anyway, being an obsessive fan of the game he wasn't particularly good at. Frank and Sam, though, seemed to play for blood.

She supposed it had to do with who they were. Sam was the better negotiator and bluffer – she had once promised never to buy a used car from him – while her husband was a master strategist and tactician, and both men had a healthy dose of competitive drive. You'd never know they were best friends to see them go at each other over printed pieces of cardboard.

"I'll see it," Sam said in a voice like ice, "and raise by four."

You'd think their lives were on the line, rather than just the chips on the table.

She and Billy, on the other hand, along with anyone else who sat in, usually had the unnerving experience of being trampled by two angry, battling bulls who were so wrapped up in their own competition they barely noticed the collateral casualties.

It was a lot like the war they fought, where Federal troops and Confederate guerrillas slugged it out in a

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seemingly endless series of brutal encounters, often as not with the civilian population being caught in the crossfire.

There was a difference there, she knew. The Feds didn't much care, and seldom even noticed those innocents, but Frank did. That those inadvertent casualties were simply an inescapable fact of war, despite his best attempts to avoid them didn't matter; they ate away at his soul like a steady trickle of acid, drop by drop, and each death meant another little piece of him gone. Sometimes she worried how much of him would be left in the end.

Samantha was startled out of her reverie by Billy slapping his hand of cards down on the scarred Formica of the old kitchen table that had been conscripted into their gaming surface.

"I fold. That's it for me; I'm busted for this evening." Leaning back and interlacing his thick fingers while raising his massive tattooed arms over his head as he stretched, popping his knuckles in the process, he added, "I'm damned glad we're not playing for real money!"

His motion caused the weight of the small notebook he carried in the pocket of his triple-extra-large flannel shirt to slide the cloth across his broad chest. The result was to spread the garment open to reveal what was underneath, and Samantha clapped a hand over her mouth in a failed effort to stifle a snort of laughter.

"Where on Earth did you get that tee shirt?"

The sudden interruption drew Frank and Sam's attention away from trying to take each other to the cleaners, and a second later, they were laughing too, even though the tone of their humor had a definite bitter undertone to it.

Billy's black tee shirt bore a picture of an opossum, along with the words, *"Possum: the other, <u>other</u> white meat."*

"You like that?" the big man asked through a lazy grin, "Cynthia made some up today on the silk screen. She thought it would be appropriate."

"It's appropriate, all right," Sam muttered, "We've eaten enough of the damned things lately!"

Samantha didn't miss the mischievous gleam in her husband's eye when he casually but deliberately remarked, "Tastes just like pork to me."

"It does not taste like pork!" Sam thundered, bristling like an angry terrier. As someone who had formerly made his living as a pig farmer, he took any maligning of pork more than a little personally. "I know pork, and it doesn't taste anything like possum!"

"I don't know 'bout that," Billy drawled, unable to resist the urge to get in on the fun, "Soak 'er down with a little barbeque sauce, and I don't tell the difference."

"Soak a turd down with barbeque sauce and *you* couldn't tell the difference!" He glared at his tormentors, fuming and clenching his fists, and then realized from their grins that they had provoked him just for the fun of it. He responded with an irritable smile of his own, and said, "Tell you what; you figure out how to make ham or bacon out of a possum, you come and talk to me. In the meantime, I'll stick with hogs."

"Listen, you three," Samantha said, clutching one hand on her stomach and feeling a little queasy at the subject under discussion, "can we please talk about something else besides possum? I'm sorry I brought it up, now!"

Billy's tee shirt was funny, and that was a fact, but the subsequent discussion had made her do something she knew better than to do, and that was think about what they ate.

The country, particularly the militarily occupied war zone of the Southern states, had sunk well beyond a simple depression, and was rapidly headed towards open famine; some places were there already. Hundreds, maybe thousands of Southerners had literally died of starvation or malnutrition-related diseases, and hundreds of thousands more didn't get nearly enough to eat. For the guerrillas, operating covertly and on the run while sharing what supplies they could spare, first with their dependents and then with the civilian populace as both a humanitarian and a political act, food was a constant logistical headache. Adding to the problem was the fact that they had to have more than enough to eat; they had to have enough to actually train and fight on, doubling or tripling the number of calories required. On the best days, they either hijacked a grocery truck or, better still, ate the enemy's supplies, stolen fair and square, spoils of war as legitimate as the guns and ammunition, uniforms and equipment they took and used for their own. On good days, they bought food from

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the locals, or someone who was a sympathizer donated it to them. On normal days, however, she made it a point not to go near the kitchen. A lot of energy and manpower went towards the acquisition of food, gathering it or killing it; details were constantly roaming the woods with traps, trotlines, bows and crossbows, or anything else that could kill game without wasting ammo and attracting enemy attention. Many of the guerrillas had been hunters and trappers all their lives, and, being men, were not nearly as persnickety when it came to food as women tended to be; to them, meat was meat, although they'd all readily admit some of it was definitely better than others. Her own tastes, and most of the urban or younger women at headquarters, were not quite so broad.

Logically, she knew, when they had "beef," it was a lot more likely that its original owner had antlers than horns, and may have had some tire tracks on its hide to boot, but she didn't like to think about it. Even more so, she didn't like to think about the skins from opossums, raccoons, bears, and muskrats she saw hanging in an old tobacco shed, that the guerrillas traded occasionally, because a part of her knew damned good and well where the remainder of the animal had ended up. Still, it could be worse; she had also glimpsed snake and alligator skins, coyote hides, and even a few skunk pelts on occasion, and once she even ran across an empty armadillo shell. God only knew where that had come from.

No wonder we eat a lot of soup! It adds a whole new meaning to the words "mystery meat!"

Still, there never really seemed to be enough food, no matter how much they were willing to stretch the definition. Billy was a prime example; originally three-hundred-fifty pounds when the war began, he was over sixty pounds lighter now, his beer gut nearly gone, and leaving little more than lightly-padded muscle on his six and a half-foot frame. None of the women worried about dieting anymore; in fact, more often than not, they had the opposite concern, especially Samantha. With Linda still nursing, she couldn't afford to starve herself.

They could have done better, she knew; all they had to do was to take what they needed from the Southern populace, as a tax for fighting for their freedom. One officer had even suggested it...once. After the verbal strip Frank had torn off him for doing so, no one else ever brought the idea up again.

Even though she was often hungry, she was proud of her husband for that stand. He fought this war to the knife, but at the same time, he intended to maintain not only his own integrity, but that of the Cause he served, to the best of his ability without letting it cost them the war.

"There are some things we cannot do, and still build a country worth living in!" he had said, and both she, and the rest of the Confederate high command agreed.

Unfortunately, she knew some of those in the lower ranks did not. No army is made up entirely of selfless heroes, but of humans; truth be told, any given soldier in any given army of any given country is just as likely to be a criminal as a paladin if presented with the right opportunity.

"All right, I thought we were here to play cards, not run a cooking class" she heard Sam saying, "Are you going to put up or shut up?"

"I'll see it, and raise by two more."

Colonel Charles "Lucky Charlie" Carnes looked up irritably at the sound of knuckles rapping on the door to his "office:" actually a converted bedroom in his safe house headquarters on the outskirts of Winnsboro. Since he had been promoted to second in command over the Confederate Army Provisional's South Carolina Theater, he had been irritable a lot. His previous experience, first with the US Army and later with the Confederates, had always been with smaller units, from company size on down. Now the responsibility for several thousand men operating primarily as semi-autonomous guerrilla cells across more than thirty thousand square miles had been dropped in his lap, and the workload had gone up exponentially. Not only did he not know what a full night's sleep was anymore, but the pressure took a toll on his battered body as well...rather, it took a toll on the parts no longer there. Everything he had left, he kept in a state of maximum fitness, but the bits that were missing tended to ache worse under stress, and the worst part was that there was no way to rub them.

During his stint in the US military in Iraq, Charlie had run afoul of an IED: an Improvised Explosive

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Device, better known as a roadside bomb. The blast took both his legs, his left arm, left ear, left eye, the left side of his face, and his left ball, along with his marriage and military career...for awhile. The desperate Confederates saw past all that, and took him on anyway at his original rank of Captain. Following his leading in the daring raid that freed several of their headquarters personnel being held prisoner, General Gore had promoted him, and placed him under Colonel Sam Wirtz, the Palmetto State's Representative on the Confederate Council Provisional. Sam, in turn, had informed Charlie that, as a career soldier, he was much better able to run the military end of things than his nominal commander, and dumped it all in the younger man's lap while he concentrated on the equally important job of establishing and reinforcing the Confederates' political power base amongst the civilian population. Charlie still ran everything major by him of course, but Sam generally rubberstamped it, trusting in his subordinate's experience and judgment. Charlie grimaced.

It feels good to be trusted, but sometimes it's a shit-load of work!

"Come!"

The door opened, and the Palmetto State Commander was startled to see Major Joe Hawkins walk in. Following a perfunctory exchange of salutes that were little more than waves, Charlie got to his steel spring feet, and stuck out his remaining arm. He smiled too, even though the effect of that expression on a face divided, with one side handsome and the other a mass of scar tissue, tended to disturb most people who didn't know him very well.

Major Hawkins wasn't most people, and he grabbed Charlie's hand without hesitation, although he didn't even attempt a smile, and that lack caught his superior's attention immediately. Besides being a naturally friendly man to begin with, the officer had been a car salesman before the war, and a quick and ready smile had been the burley, sandy-haired man's stock in trade, as well as ingrained habit.

"Hey, Joe!" Charlie said before releasing his hand and sitting back down. "I'm out of coffee, but I've got some fresh iced tea." Gesturing at the somewhat battered mini-fridge in the corner, he added, "Help yourself."

"Thanks." Charlie watched him as he went to the fridge, took out the pitcher and poured a glass before replacing it, and he could tell by the man's stiff, tense movements as much as his uncharacteristically dour countenance, that something was badly wrong. Still, he waited until Joe took the guest chair and then took a sip of tea before remarking on it.

"I've got the feeling you're going to tell me something I'm not going to like."

Swallowing hard and looking at the Colonel over the rim of the glass, Joe said, "I've got something to tell you that there ain't nobody going to like."

Charlie listened with growing incredulousness for the next few minutes, then had a brief but sincere cussing, desk-pounding fit before calling for his communications officer to set up an appointment with Colonel Sam Wirtz ASAP.

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CHAPTER 2

Off the side of a dead-end dirt road a few miles outside of Patrick, South Carolina, in the cramped back seat of a rusty, piece of crap Ford Escort that had seen better days more than two decades ago, fifteen-year-old Susie Miller pulled her tongue out of Rayray Hayden's mouth and came up for air.

"Quit for a minute, Rayray!"

Her sixteen year-old boyfriend, whose real name was actually Raymond Ray Hayden, smiled at her, the sparse wisps of the beard and moustache he was trying to grow looking for all the world like a ring of dirt around his mouth as he continued to strain forward.

"I don't want to quit."

"Well, you're gonna!" She pushed him back and reached for the door handle. "I gotta pee!"

He grunted at that and reluctantly let her go, taking a moment to light up a hand-rolled cigarette while she slammed the door behind her. Grinning around the cancer stick and trying his best to look cool, he called through the open window at her back.

"You need any help?"

Turning her head, she tried to look admonishing, but only halfway pulled it off.

"I think I can manage by myself, thank you very much. And don't you be trying to peek at me again this time either!"

Shrugging, he told her, "You can't fault me for trying."

You're trying all right, Susie mentally muttered as she stepped into the trees and picked a good-sized oak just a few yards away to get behind. Once satisfied that she was adequately concealed by the trunk, she worked her tight blue jeans and worn cotton underpants down her somewhat plump white legs and, after first making sure there were no snakes or spiders below her, she squatted.

She really liked Rayray – in fact, she thought she might love him – but she wasn't willing to go all the way with him...not yet, anyway, mainly because she wasn't sure how he felt about her. He was fun and he liked her, sure, but he seemed to spend most of the time pressuring her, trying to get her to give in.

I swear, sometimes I think he's got his brain in the head of his tally-whacker!

She was interrupted in her thoughts of how immature her boyfriend was by a loud buzzing, and a shift in the light breeze brought a faint but distinctly stale odor, making her wrinkle her nose in disgust.

Phew! There must be something dead back here!

She glanced around idly, and she was just finishing up when her eyes caught sight of a woman's face staring blankly back at her from under a bush not twenty feet away, its features blackened and bloating in the heat, and crawling so thickly with maggots and blowflies that it seemed to be moving, writhing as if it were trying to say something.

Her scream brought Rayray out of the car and on the run, only to meet the hysterical Susie plunging out of the brush and tripping over the pants and panties still gathered around her knees, with him peeking at her being the last thing on her mind.

Any casual passerby, assuming one had managed to get past the carefully hidden layers of heavily armed security to get that close, wouldn't have given a second thought to the two women walking along the edge of the woods near the fallow field with their dog trotting alongside. After all, it was just another farm in South Carolina farm country, complete with a house and barn, and, in their jeans and boots, the two looked like they belonged there. Anyone would have thought they were just two friends out for a stroll, at least until he got a good look at the giant, scarred bulldog named Thumper and saw the bulges under their jackets, and the haunted

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eyes that said loudly and clearly that both of the women had seen far more than the average farm girl.

Finally, the pair came to a stop by an old log and seated themselves side by side, leaving Thumper to sniff around. The younger and more slender of the pair hung her head, biting her lip as her blonde companion slid one arm around her waist for comfort. Samantha didn't ask what was wrong with Donna Waddell; she simply waited for the nineteen year-old girl to tell her in her own time. After a couple of minutes, she did.

"Sammie, I need your help!"

Samantha knew that much, which was why she left Linda with Frank so she could devote her total concentration to whatever was bothering her friend. Not that Frank minded; he doted on his little girl, treasured every second in her company, and constantly worried that he wasn't able to spend enough time with her. When Samantha had left, her husband was holding their child and bouncing her on his knee, repeating, "Ride 'em cowgirl!" over and over again, while Linda gurgled and cooed back at him, both of them enjoying themselves thoroughly.

Besides, the nature of the war and his place in it made sixteen-to-twenty-hour days the norm rather than the exception, and if she could manage to insert a few minutes worth of break in there for him to be himself instead of what some had called, "the Confederate Warlord," she would do it.

And I don't feel a damned bit guilty over it, either! We've given more than our share to this war – all of us have!

Focusing her full attention on her friend, she said with all sincerity, "You've got it; tell me what's wrong."

Donna grabbed the hand of her commanding officer, best friend, and adopted big sister, and Samantha hugged her even tighter.

"It's...it's Tommy."

Samantha nodded. *I knew it was either him or her.*

"Go on."

"It's just...Sammie, how often do you and Frank do it?"

Samantha blinked once in surprise at the unexpected question, then told her, "Donna, you know I love you, but Frank and I don't discuss our sex life with anyone. All I'll say is that I'm very satisfied, and let's leave it at that." If it weren't for the seriousness of the girl, she would have smiled and winked. Her sex life with Frank was more than simply satisfying. It seemed like a constant adventure, ranging from simple comfort to total exhaustion, and they *did it,* as Donna put it, so often that it continued to amaze her. In fact, it was at the point that she was a little embarrassed by the apparent insatiability of their joint libidos, even though they were husband and wife.

Just not embarrassed enough to do anything about it!

"Are you having a problem in that regard?" That wouldn't surprise her; in fact, considering that both Donna and her fiancé had been raped in Federal captivity as an interrogation tactic while the other had been forced to watch, it would astonish her if they didn't have some problems.

"Yeah. It's Tommy; he...he...*he doesn't want me anymore!*"

Those last words came out as a wail and tears started coming full-blast along with them. Samantha pulled her friend's head over on her shoulder and held her tight.

"Oh, Donna! Did he tell you that?"

"No-o, but he-he doesn't want to...you know. W-we haven't since we were rescued."

"Listen, he was damaged pretty severely after they kicked him in the groin; he was all black and swollen up like baseballs. *Can* he still get an erection?"

"Yes; I've seen him when he's sleeping and in the mornings, you know..."

While she held her friend, Samantha carefully considered what she was going to say. The younger girl was so emotionally fragile after her ordeal that the wrong words could shatter her like glass. Every syllable, every inflection, had to be chosen so carefully, it was like dancing through a mine field.

"Maybe he thinks, after...what happened to you, *you* don't want to."

She felt the brunette head jerking back and forth in denial against her shoulder.

"That's not it! I've asked him, and all he does is shake his head and turn away."

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Samantha sucked in her breath through her teeth. *Good God, this is going to be a tough one!*

"It's not me; it's him. I understand why," Donna went on, "but I don't think any less of him for it! It wasn't his fault what those sons of bitches did, but he just doesn't think the same way about himself anymore." She sobbed, making her body shake violently. "Oh God, Sammie, I don't know what to do!"

As she thought about it, Samantha didn't know either; after all, Donna wasn't the only one in her relationship who was fragile. If anything, she suspected that Tommy might have it even worse; after all, in addition to everything else, he had been left almost entirely without use of his hands after hanging for hours in Federal shackles. This was going to be a long, hard battle...

That's it! It's a battle, and I need to plan it like one! To do that, I'm going to need help.

"Leave it to me, little sister; I have a plan."

Actually, it was more like the seed of a plan, or maybe a vague, very general idea of a plan, but it was all she had and she would go with it.

"Come on, Tommy! You can do this!"

Standing at the edge of the makeshift track that doubled as a pasture field and ignoring the dull-eyed curiosity of the Holstein cattle chewing their cud and staring at them, Billy emphasized his words by pumping his huge fist up and down at waist level as if churning butter.

"What the hell would you know about it?" Tommy Richardson demanded, glaring back, and the big man shook his head irritably.

"I know a hell of a lot about it! I was banged up too, after they raided the farm; remember that? I did rehab too, and I'm still doing it! I know it hurts like a son of a bitch, but you've still got to do it! Besides, this ain't nearly as tough as your Green Beret training was, so just suck it up and get it over with!"

"Look, it's not the pain," he muttered, looking away, "I just don't feel like it right now, all right?" He started to turn away but Billy grabbed him by the shoulder and jerked him back.

"No it ain't all right! Damn it, we need to get you back in shape!"

"What the hell for? There's no point in it, not anymore. I can't even use my own hands!"

"I'll tell you what the hell for," the cold voice came from behind them, and they turned to see Frank standing there, having walked up unseen. Tommy grimaced.

Great! Him too – that's just what I need!

"The first reason is that we're guerrillas, and we survive as much by running as we do by fighting; I shouldn't have to explain that to you of all people; you know that. We're also a unit, which means we don't leave people behind, and we can only run as fast as our slowest member. Right now, that's you. Unless you're at least trying to build yourself up to a reasonable level of fitness, you are putting all of our lives in jeopardy, including that of your best friend, your fiancée, and my wife and child, all because you can't get your act together!"

Frank's voice was a hard, cold and unyielding as a whip made of spring steel wire, and he flogged Tommy with it so unmercifully, even though it hurt him to do it.

"The second reason is that you're in the Confederate Army Provisional, I'm your commanding officer, and I'm ordering you to do it. Billy!"

The big man was so startled at Frank's abrupt shifting of attention to him he actually jumped. He noticed, though, that the General's cold eyes never left Tommy's.

"Yeah, Frank?"

"Go to supply and get a pack frame and some tie-down straps. Bring it back here. You will strap Captain Richardson to it, and I will carry him around this track on my back for the required number of laps. This afternoon, it will be your turn. Everybody will take a turn, including the women. If we've all got to carry his weight, we might as well get used to it."

"You son of a bitch!" Tommy hissed ferociously. "Damn you, you son of a bitch!"

"I may well be both, but I'm telling you this; you're going to do your time on that track this morning, one way or another. Either you walk under your own power, or I *will* by-God carry you! You've got about three

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seconds to make your choice, or I'll send Billy after the pack. One."

Tommy was still stunned, but the idea of the unbearable humiliation was beginning to set in on him.

"Damn you, Frank, don't you do this to me!"

"Two."

With an inarticulate, arm-waving shout of rage, Tommy took off down the unmarked course at a quick walking pace, his limp painfully obvious.

"Frank," Billy said softly, more uncomfortable than he could ever remember at being present for that particular exchange between two people he thought the world of, "you didn't have to be so hard on him."

Frank blew out his breath and shook his head in denial of Billy's statement.

"Yeah, I did." His voice had lost its hard edge, and seemed to drip with sadness over what he had had to do. "It was the only way to get him motivated to do what he has to do." Jerking his head to indicate they should leave, he said, "Let's take a walk. He'll do it now on his own, and us staying here to watch will only embarrass him more, and make him think we don't trust him to finish."

They stepped off, walking back into the dilapidated barn and dodging cow pies as they went.

"Everything I told him was true; as long as he's not fit, he puts everybody at risk. Unless we want to ask Mike for a spare wheelchair to push him in if we have to bug out of here, he won't even hold up for an hour at the rate he's going. Since none of us are willing to leave him behind, and he knows too much to be left behind, that kind of narrows down our options."

Billy swallowed hard. He knew what it meant all too well. There would be two options in that case: everybody would die…or Tommy would die, and one of them would have to do it. He shook his head hard, trying to jar that horrible image out of his mind.

"Yeah, but still..."

Frank turned to face him, and reached up to put one hand on the giant's shoulder.

"The other reason I was so hard on him is for him. He's *got* to regain his own self-respect, and, especially considering the active life he's led up to now, he isn't going to do that sitting around getting soft and feeling sorry for himself."

"Damn it, Frank, the man can barely wipe his own ass!"

"You think I don't know that? That's why I had our people get that bidet and install it in the latrine. I'll do whatever I can for him, but there's nothing I can do for his hands."

"I can kidnap a surgeon."

Frank shook his head again. "It wouldn't help; I've already thought of that and checked it with our nurse. We can snatch a surgeon easily enough, like Edge did for Jim Reynolds that time back in Columbia, but this isn't just digging out a bullet or removing an appendix. We're talking nerve grafts, full-scale neurosurgery. Unless we can kidnap a whole neurosurgical operating room with all the equipment and personnel, it wouldn't help."

Billy waved his hands in frustration.

"Well what the hell are we supposed to do, then?"

"The same as we always do: whatever we can. Until I can figure out something, I'm going to keep playing the "bad cop" as long as he needs it. But you keep an eye on him; he's traumatized and depressed, and we both know what that can lead to. Talk to Donna too; I want somebody keeping him in sight at all times from now on."

Billy blew out his breath in a loud whoosh. There had never been a suicide in their unit, but they knew other guerrilla bands hadn't been so fortunate. And right now, he was feeling pretty depressed himself.

"I wish you hadn't said that."

"Are you saying you didn't need to hear it?"

"No, I'm just wishing I hadn't heard it, that's all."

They walked away, unaware that someone else had heard it as well.

Field Marshal Jonathon Edge's Russian fiancée, Victoria Slastyonoff, was crouched down in a nearby cattle stall, playing with a litter of kittens the barn cat had given birth to just over three weeks ago. They had their eyes open, but still staggered when they walked, and were so cute and vulnerable she was unable to

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resist fooling with them every time she got the chance. If nothing else, they gave her something to hold while Edge was gone. It had been a week and a half since his last visit, and she missed him terribly. In fact, she had been doing just that; feeling sorry for herself until she caught the conversation between the three men.

She decided that if she could do nothing for herself, maybe she'd feel better if she could help her hosts...

Not my hosts, not anymore. These are my friends!

In the CAP Headquarters Company, Victoria always seemed to stand at the perimeter of the crowd of Southerners, not quite fitting in. Whenever Edge traveled – which was far more often than not – she remained with the only people Edge trusted, and thus was more-or-less assigned to Samantha Gore, Frank's wife.

At first, the two hadn't been too sure about each other. Southern culture stressed politeness above almost anything else, while, under Communism, manners in the former Soviet Union had been considered a bourgeois affectation, and actively discouraged. In Russia, that meant two generations had grown up in a land where blunt abruptness was considered a virtue of sorts, and it showed. More, it sometimes grated, nearly as much as the common Russian habit of not smiling unless something was funny, a habit definitely at odds with the Southern way, where its purpose was to show friendliness and openness.

Victoria was an intelligent woman and knew all those things, as well as what she was called, both to her face and behind her back. She was "*Vika*" to Edge and those closest to her, the Anglicized *"Vicky"* to most of her fiancé's supporters, "*Miss Slastyonoff*" to those who took no side on the issue, and *"the spy"* or *"Edge's Communist whore"* to his opponents, who were still stubbornly fighting the Cold War that had ended decades before, and had involved the same United States they were currently at odds with themselves.

So many people – any people – can never seem to think beyond their past. She knew more than a few Russians who felt the same way about the Southerners, and often reminded herself that Stupidity Avenue was never a one-way street.

Victoria did try her best to fit in, and had swallowed her pride and humbly asked Samantha to teach her what she needed to know. Samantha had agreed to become the de-facto headmistress of what Sam and Frank teasingly called *"Sammie's finishing school,"* and, as a result, not only had the Russian's manners become more acceptable to the Southerners, but, as the two beautiful women began to understand one another much better, and they grew closer until no one could deny that they were good friends. Truth be told, she knew Samantha liked her one hell of a lot better than she liked Edge, although the Information Officer's feelings toward the Confederate Field Marshal had mellowed greatly since he brought home his foreign girlfriend, now bride-to-be. That helped, in large part because, from what she could determine, having someone had mellowed Edge himself.

It also helped that Victoria had a typical Russian's affection for children, and was always eager to baby sit Frank and Samantha's daughter Linda. She would play with the little girl for hours, and enjoy every minute of it. Victoria suspected that part of it may have been that, despite a previous, failed marriage in her homeland, she was childless, and, as she was now past forty and Edge over sixty, was likely to stay that way.

Not that she was idle; she was Edge's and Frank's liaison to both the Russian government and the "advisors:" five hundred *Spetsnaz* commandos, along with fifty experienced Serbian officers and noncoms currently in Dixie, acting both as trainers and elite reinforcements in the ever-increasing number of raids against the Feds. The advisors' foreign mannerisms and brutal training tactics ruffled a lot of feathers amongst some of the Confederate guerrillas, and any foreign involvement in their war, no matter how necessary, was an anathema to others; in fact, it scared the hell out of them.

Victoria's main job ended up being a peacemaker between the Southerners and their Russian allies, and she was good at it. Of course, in two societies that were both definitely patriarchal, the fact that she was a beautiful woman helped a lot...just not quite enough. Some of the Southerners harbored a violent hatred for her just on general principles, and an even more violent one for Edge, and, given the opportunity, might try to do something about it by getting to him through her. Hence, Edge left her in the care of Frank and Sam, who took their responsibilities seriously, and guarded their commander's lover from any threats – from without *or* within – with the same dedication they practiced when protecting their own families…that being total.

In return, Victoria dedicated herself to them as a sort of surrogate family, and, knowing it would make them happy to get their friend Tommy taken care of, she would arrange it. Besides, she liked Donna and Tommy, and

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felt sorry for them. There was so much pain piled up behind their eyes, she was glad to be able to do something that might alleviate it, even a little.

Pausing long enough to pick up each kitten and rub noses with it, she rose and went to seek out Mike in the communications office. She had some calls to make.

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CHAPTER 3

Frank looked at Sam and Billy, and saw they were blushing as deeply as he was. This had to be the strangest strategic planning session he had ever been involved in, as well as the most embarrassing. Sitting at the table with three women – Samantha, Donna, and Victoria, who had been recruited into the effort as well – and talking graphically about sex wasn't conducive to a man being at ease. In fact, the only one in the room who seemed relaxed was little Linda, who was too young to know what was being said and didn't care; right now, she was sitting beneath the table being single-mindedly engrossed in untying her father's boots and playing with the strings.

Sam, anxious to leave and head down to Winnsboro in response to a cryptic but urgent request from Colonel Carnes, was even more uncomfortable. He wasn't a Puritan, but, like Frank, he was a Christian with a strong sense of propriety, and held to the traditional Southern view that the best place for sex was behind closed doors and within the bonds of marriage rather than a subject for mixed company conversation. Especially when it came to his Goddaughter, who was still living in sin with Tommy; their sex life was the last thing he wanted to talk about. Still, he loved her like she was his own, and now she needed him, which overrode any other concerns. He was both a Southerner and a Confederate soldier, and, like always, he would do what he had to do – *anything* he had to do – for his Cause and for his family.

Billy had been an outlaw biker before the War, was religious only in a much more nominal sense, and generally tended to look at sex like he did food or drink; something you got whenever you could get it. However, Tommy was his best friend and he had known Donna since she was a little girl, so being put in the situation of discussing the intimate details of their personal lives was more than a little unsettling to him too.

Frank's relationship with the pair was a combination of all of the above. Tommy and Donna were treasured friends and loyal comrades that he had fought and bled beside; they were on the same level of blood kin as far as he was concerned. He loved them both like family, and, like Sam, he would do whatever it took...which didn't keep it from being embarrassing as hell with the women there, just the same.

Just think about the plan, Frank kept telling himself, *just concentrate on the plan.*

"Donna," he said, "you're going to have to be the instigator; you're going to have to make the first move, and not take 'no' for an answer."

"But...do you mean *rape* him?"

"No, but you are going to have to be insistent. Before you do that, though, you're going to have figure some way to get him in a more receptive mood."

"Liquor," Billy said quickly, "Get him about halfway hammered first, and he'll be less likely to resist. Just don't overdo it."

Sam broke in. "But if he can't..." Looking around at the trio of women, he swallowed hard and blushed deeper before continuing. "If he can't get it up, it'll be worse for him psychologically than before. Slip him a Viagra or something beforehand."

"Drug him?" Donna asked in horror, and Sam spread his hands helplessly.

"You got a better idea? Besides, this is just a one-time deal, just to get him back on his game."

Frank said, "I agree; we have to get him over this hurdle, and not only for sex." He didn't add anything, but he didn't have to; they all knew Tommy was a suicide waiting to happen if something wasn't done soon. "The thing is, we don't drink much; we can't afford it. Tommy's not stupid. If we're going to make this look natural, we need to have something to celebrate."

"We do."

All heads turned toward Victoria.

"When you and Billy were talking to Tommy during his exercises today, I was in the stall right next to you."

"What on earth were you doing in there?" Sam demanded, and then it was her turn to blush.

"I wasn't eavesdropping! I was playing with the kittens. Anyway, once I realized what you needed, I got with Mike and got a message home." She shrugged. "Maybe I wasn't entirely honest with my contact about just

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how important Tommy is to the Revolution, but..." Her shoulders raised once more, accompanied by a mischievous grin that showed her perfect white teeth. "Anyway, I got the permission from my government. If we can get Tommy back to my country – which shouldn't be an insurmountable problem – he can get the neurosurgery and subsequent therapy he needs. Donna will have to go with him, of course, to act as his caregiver."

"Your people would do that for him?" Samantha asked, startled, and the Russian nodded.

"Yes; we're allies now, remember? Besides, someone vitally important to the war effort, as Frank will *insist* that Tommy is," she said with a smile, "is well worth getting back into action. It's a little lie, but a good one, I think. When we break the news to him that he and Donna will be going to Russia to get his hands fixed, that will definitely be cause for celebration."

Reading between the lines, Frank asked, "How many favors did you have to call in to arrange this?"

"Not many," she lied, and Frank replied with, "Bull!" before reaching out to squeeze her hand. "I owe you for this one, Vika; I owe you big."

"We all do," Billy said, reaching over to pull her close and hug her for a moment, nearly making her disappear in his massive arms. When he let go, she was startled to see the big man wiping tears from his eyes. Seeing her staring, he excused his emotions by pointing out, "He's my best friend."

Frank nodded.

"All right then, here's the plan. I'll work him through a good rehab session this evening to get his testosterone levels up. As soon as I'm about finished, you three come in all happy and break the news to him. Billy, you round up whatever booze you can get and bring it with you, and we'll have an "impromptu" celebration of his impending cure. Donna, grind up a pill and slip it to him when it starts getting late, and after that, it's all up to you. Beg, borrow or steal the sexiest clothes you can find, and don't take "no" for an answer."

"One more thing," Victoria broke in, looking at Donna, "shave."

Donna glanced down at her legs, invisible through her blue jeans, and knew they were stubbly. All the women tended to be stubbly and usually worse, often downright hairy, as razors were scarce, so they didn't get to shave half as often as they would have liked. They were very lucky to manage it once a week, even though most of the men, except for a handful that owned straight razors, had had long ago quit shaving in order to spare the razors for them. Even most of the skinheads had gotten pretty shaggy in the name of Southern womanhood.

"Oh, don't worry; I plan on shaving my legs, doing my hair, putting on some makeup, and getting everything just right."

"I'm not talking about your legs."

"I beg your pardon?" Donna asked, and Victoria gestured in frustration as she sought for the English term.

"You know, your *pizda*."

"My what?"

"Ooh, I don't know what your word for it is! You know; shave your...your...*whatchamacallit*."

Sam had just taken a sip of iced tea when he realized what she meant and promptly spat it all over Frank, who was already so red in the face he barely noticed. Samantha's eyes were wide, and Billy howled with laughter and pounded the table with his fist until the laminated surface was bouncing up and down.

"That'll do it!"

Frank looked off to one side, muttering to himself, "Tell me again how I got roped into this conversation."

"But..."Donna asked, shocked, "why?"

Victoria patted her hand. "Trust me; I was married a long time. Most men love that, and besides, it's something different, and he needs a change, right?"

Samantha turned to Frank. "Do men really like that?" she asked, and saw him blush even darker than before, which Billy found so hilarious that he saved his friend from having to answer.

"You're not on the Internet much, are you?" the big man asked her sarcastically.

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“Well?” Frank asked when Samantha entered their makeshift bedroom late that evening, and she responded with a broad smile.

“From the sounds, I’d say they were working up to it, although I didn’t hear all of it. Victoria and I felt kind of indecent hanging around listening in the hall.”

Frank chuckled.

“And you’re right. Still, it’s good to know things worked out. I really worry about them.”

“Me too,” she said as she undressed, facing away from him and hanging her clothes over the chair back, “It’s amazing how much a nice surprise can affect people.”

“I reckon so,” he began, and then abruptly stopped, eyes and mouth both opening in shock when his wife turned to face him. Obviously, she had found a razor of her own.

“Surprise,” she purred with a seductive smile, “Do you like it?”

Later – *much* later – she supposed the answer must have been a resounding "yes," because he demonstrated his appreciation so thoroughly and repeatedly she wasn’t any too sure she’d be able to get out of bed in the morning.

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DAY 715

CHAPTER 4

Major Hawkins was coming to a full realization as to exactly what it meant to be on the hot seat. After he relayed the story to Colonel Carnes, Lucky Charlie had made him relay it over again, in his presence, to Colonel Wirtz the minute the senior officer arrived. Four hours after that, they were all at the main headquarters in Camden with General Gore and his wife, Samantha, who held the rank of Colonel and CAP Information Officer, and it was going to be the same thing all over. He supposed he should be thankful that Field Marshal Edge apparently wasn't in the area, or he would have to do it yet again.

Right now, he was sitting in a chair across from all four higher-ranking officers, and Lucky Charlie nodded at him.

"Tell them what you told me."

Joe sighed. "I think we may have a squad gone rogue."

Frank's face hardened.

"There's an easy way to deal with that before it gets out of hand. Not easy, maybe," he corrected himself, because killing was never – *or should never* – be easy, "but effective."

Sam shook his head. "I'm afraid it may be too late for that. Major Hawkins?"

Hawkins straightened up in his seat and settled in for his testimony, because he knew that's what this was. It had gone too far for anything else now.

"I have a semi-autonomous six-man squad in Chesterfield County, under the command of 2nd Lieutenant David Morrow. Day before yesterday, I received a message from one of his men, Private Arnold Daniels. Daniels appeared to have been beaten fairly severely." He spread his hands, having trouble getting his own head around what had happened. "He reported that, two days before, Lieutenant Morrow's squad had been collecting road taxes on Route 102, just southeast of Patrick."

All of them nodded their understanding. Even though never officially sanctioned by the Confederate Army Provisional or the Confederate Council, it was a common way for local units to raise much-needed funds. Armed squads would set up brief, impromptu roadblocks on secondary roads, and solicit "contributions" from vehicles with plates or drivers from outside the South, making Yankee tourists and businesses help pay the cost of the war. Southerners were waved on through, or at least they were after Frank set a couple of harsh examples as to just what would happen to any guerrilla robbing their own people. Still, money was necessary to the war effort, so neither Frank nor Field Marshal Jonathon Edge, nor any of their subordinate State Theater Commanders had ordered a halt to the practice, despite its potential dangers...dangers that were about to be brought home.

"According to Daniels, they had stopped a rental car carrying two women in their twenties. Upon checking their IDs, they turned out to be off-duty enemy soldiers – one White and one Hispanic – and they were taken into custody. Captured along with them was two and a half bottles of tequila."

Samantha looked at Frank, and both of them felt their stomachs drop at the direction this was headed. Considering the circumstances, the alcohol, and the insistent, almost frantic demand from Sam to hear the particulars on this, they knew this story was not going to end well.

"Daniels informed me that four of the men – Sergeant Brett Wells, Corporal Randal Foster, and Privates William Smith and John Amos – got drunk on the liquor, gang-raped both the female POWs, and then shot and killed them, before dumping their bodies in the brush off a back road in the Carolina Sandhills Wildlife Refuge."

It was as if someone had thrown a bucket of cold water over the room. They, like most Southerners, still held the traditional attitudes their people had always had toward rapists; in fact, every officer there had either personally executed or had ordered the execution of more than one rapist, both captured enemy soldiers and

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rogue civilians. Still, they were too experienced to let their outrage over the act cloud their thinking.

"And what was Private Daniels doing during this time?" Frank growled skeptically, having been a cop for too long before the war to simply accept the idea that, just because someone was willing to inform, he wasn't personally involved.

The Major blew out his breath. "He claims he was about a mile down the road acting as lookout, and notified them the target car was coming before rejoining them. He said they were already at it by the time he arrived, swore he tried to stop them, and got the hell beaten out of him for his pains. He also says they threatened to kill him if he ever said anything."

"Is that why he jumped the chain of command and went to you instead of his own officer?" Samantha asked, and Joe nodded.

"Yes, plus his swearing that Lieutenant Morrow was present during the alleged beating, as well as during the rape and murder of the two women. He apparently didn't take part in it, but Daniels insists he was there the whole time."

No one would have thought it possible for Frank's eyes to get any harder than they already were, but they did.

"And he *allowed* this to happen?"

Joe shrugged. "According to Daniels, the Lieutenant ordered them to stop a couple of times, but they were already drunk and told him pretty much what he could do with himself, and went ahead and raped them. Afterwards, they took them back in the brush and shot them."

Samantha heard the sound of knuckles popping from her husband squeezing his fists tightly in anger. She was just as outraged, but, while she knew her husband would handle his end of it, anger or no, she also had a job to do as the CAP Information Officer. Part of that job was to make the Confederate Cause look good, although how she could put the best face on this situation was currently beyond her.

"Have you recovered the bodies?"

"No; I don't even know for sure they're there, or exactly where. All I have is Private Daniels' word and his general description of the location."

"So no one else knows about this yet, at least to your knowledge?"

"Not that I know of."

Turning to her husband, she said, "Frank, what do you intend to do about this...this *incident?*"

God, that seems like such a sterile word to describe gang rape and double murder!

Instead of speaking directly to her, he turned to Lucky Charlie and began issuing orders. "I want a full investigation pronto. Send the Irregulars 1st Company; I want the entire squad arrested *immediately* – Lieutenant Morrow and Private Daniels included – and held separately, with absolutely no contact with one another so they can't work out a story. If they're guilty, there's only one penalty for what they've done; I'll execute them."

"I guess we'd better recover those bodies," Sam told them, "I hate to take part in a damned cover-up, but it's going to really hit the fan if this becomes public knowledge. This is the kind of thing the enemy does, not us! If we can handle it quietly, in-house, we can see to it justice is done without letting those assho...." He paused, glancing at Samantha, then changed what he was about to say. "...er, animals ruin the reputation we've worked so hard to establish." Shaking his head in frustration and anger, he added, "If they did it, they'll pay the price for it, at least. I reckon that's about the best we can do."

"If they did it," Frank declared, "you'd better believe they'll pay for it!

"Major Hawkins, your first priority after you secure Daniels and place him under arrest is to take him as a guide, and get some people out there ASAP and secure those bodies!" Thinking of his own contacts in the government and police depart of the City of Columbia, as well as dozens of other locales in the Palmetto State, his plan formed as he went. "I've got contacts with people who can do a post-mortem – a full autopsy if necessary – and collect any evidence we need to settle this thing, one way or another. I want to know; if they didn't do it, I want them cleared, and if they did, I want them dead. It's as simple as that."

Samantha looked at the solemnly nodding heads of the other officers as hers nodded along with them. She felt as rotten as they all did, but she had to agree with them. They couldn't turn back the clock, and the whole

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Confederate Army Provisional didn't deserve to be publicly tarred with a rapist's brush due to a handful of criminals in their ranks. Her husband would do his duty and make the perpetrators pay the ultimate price, and she supposed that was all that could be done.

Even as she considered that, she was typing on her notebook computer, using the highly encrypted ethernet connection at their headquarters – wireless was too risky – and brought up the local news for the area in question. The first thing she saw was the last headline she wanted to see just now, along with a picture of CSI techs in white coveralls carrying a pair of body bags out of the woods.

"It's not simple anymore," she said, her voice sounding surprisingly flat, even to her, "They've been found."

Frank looked like he wanted to swear, but instead simply said, "Tell Mike to get Edge on the line ASAP; this just became an international incident."

"I was going to do a quiet investigation, and then a quiet execution if they were found guilty," Frank explained to his commander over the phone, his voice distorted by the coded, heavily scrambled conversation, "Unfortunately, it's too late for quiet now."

Edge was so angry he could hardly speak: not at Frank or anyone else at headquarters, but at the rogue squad and the scale of the scandal their brutal, drunken act had caused. His voice was harsh.

"The morality of our Cause is evidenced by the conduct of our people; it's that perception of morality, as much as practicality, that gets us the foreign military aid and recognition we need. Now we've lost that; we've lost that moral high-ground in the public perception, and just doubled our chances of losing this war!"

"We may be able to minimize that loss."

"What have you got in mind?" Edge's voice was suddenly hopeful; Frank's primary talent often seemed to be finding a way out of even the most hopeless situations, and this certainly qualified.

Frank spoke to the other two people in the room first. "Sammie, Sam, are you listening?" Once he got an affirmative, he went on. "Okay, if either of you see any problem with anything I say, spit it out.

"All right, what I propose is this. We have one advantage; they haven't identified the bodies yet, although that could happen at any minute. We need to beat them to the punch in the media. I've already had the squad in question arrested; we need to announce that *now*, before the victims' names and military status hits the newswires. We'll announce that we've begun an investigation, and subsequently arrested six men for rape and murder; that way they can't say we're only responding to public pressure."

"Proactive is good," Samantha broke in, "but it's a gamble. Once we make the announcement, if we find out later they didn't do it, it will look even worse when we drop the charges against them. The enemy media propaganda machine will kick into overdrive, saying how we're 'taking care of our own and covering up for murder.' I don't think I need to elaborate on what the people's response to that will be; look at the hatchet job they did on Serbia, for example."

There was silence on the line for a moment as Edge weighed his options, before saying, "Do it. Right now, even as we speak. Sammie, I presume you've got a laptop within reach; type out a quick press release – a paragraph or two will do – and send it through our usual distribution network, just to let people know. We can elaborate on it later."

He could hear the faint sounds of her fingers rapidly tapping away in the background, and Sam asked, "And what if we find out they're innocent?"

"You'd better hope like hell they're guilty, or else we'll charge the informer and execute him for it instead."

"Good Lord!" Sam exclaimed, "John, you can't be serious!"

"I'm dead serious. Unless the police finger someone else and do it quickly, somebody has to die for this. If it comes between any man's life and the possible loss of this war, I'm willing to make that sacrifice."

"Even an innocent man?"

"There are no innocent men; we're all guilty of something. If Private Daniels is lying, and falsely charging his comrades with a capital crime, particularly one of this nature, then he deserves nothing less than death, and I don't think it matters much that the reason we give will be a little different than his actual act; the end result

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will be the same."

"I'll oversee the investigation myself," Frank said, but Edge's response was negative.

"No. You're not to go anywhere near this investigation, nor Sam nor Sammie either. Give Colonel Carnes what he needs, and tell him to see to it; I want him as acting as prosecutor"

"Would you mind telling me why?" Frank asked. The ex-cop was unable to fully dampen the heat that suddenly came through in his voice, feeling his professional capabilities were being called into question unjustly.

"Because Carnes is entirely capable of doing this, and because all three of you are going to be part of the government, assuming we ever win this damned thing. We can't afford to have any of our names tainted by any association whatsoever with this scandal."

"Politics!" Frank snorted derisively.

"You're damned right it's politics!" Edge informed him. "This war isn't all there is; it's not even the half of it! Once we win it, we'll have to win the peace! And I'll lay a bet with you right now; that will be harder to do than what we've gone through so far; certainly hard enough without the taint of dishonor riding on your back like a monkey!"

"I don't intend to be a politician!"

"You didn't intend to be a soldier either, yet here you are! You're a soldier because your people needed you to be one, and, when the time comes, you'll be a politician because that will be what your people will need then. You'll protect them and serve them to the best of your ability, just like you did as a police officer, as long as they need you, because that's who you are!"

Frank couldn't argue with him; not only did he know the Field Marshal outranked him, but, more importantly, he knew he was right.

That reminded me of something my grandmother would have said. I must be in sorry shape when Jonathon Edge has to become my replacement Jiminy Cricket!

"Okay."

Edge's tone was suddenly relieved, in part because he knew from experience that Frank was fully capable of bucking him if he felt it was the right thing to do. "All right then, get to it. In the meantime, I'll figure out the best way we can set up the trial."

"The trial will be the easy part," Sam said, "We can do it right here, ourselves."

"No you won't."

It was Sam's turn to get hot. "This is a South Carolina matter!"

"Not any more. Those men may be from South Carolina, but they and their squad are part of the Confederate Army Provisional. Those women they are accused of killing were enemy POWs from the United States. This thing is *way* bigger than South Carolina now, because the future of the entire Confederacy may very well ride on it."

Sam started to argue some more, but Frank laid a hand on his arm.

"He's right, Sam."

"What?" the older man demanded incredulously. "What about states' rights?" Frank met his eyes with a level stare.

"States' rights are one of the things we're fighting for; if we already had them, we wouldn't have to fight for them, would we?"

"It's the principle of the thing!"

"It's two conflicting principles. One is states' rights; the other is winning the war and the survival of the Confederacy, South Carolina included, and also including all our lives, those of my wife and child – your Goddaughter...including Donna, both your Goddaughters. Right now, which principle is more important, and which one are you willing to sacrifice?"

"I-I..." Sam sputtered for a few seconds, but, faced with the inescapable logic of Frank's argument, couldn't answer that for the life of him.

Damn it, I hate it when he's right!

"Don't think I'm cutting your state out of the loop," Edge assured them, thankful for the General's

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intervention – *and he says he's not a politician!* – "South Carolina is where the crime took place, so it will be hosting the trial, supplying the prosecution and defense council, as well as providing the media coverage; that's your bailiwick, Sammie, but I don't want you in the courtroom personally; you just arrange it. The Palmetto State has to be seen as the one pressing this, for the good of your own reputation, but the actual judgment has to be impartial, and has to be at the hands of the Confederate Army Provisional. I'll be sending in some officers from out of state as judges, which will look a whole lot better. Further, I intend to bring in a handful of international observers just so everybody can see we're doing the right thing."

"I can think of some more international observers who'll need to be there," Frank said, and then told them who he had in mind. All of them were shocked into silence for a moment, but afterwards, they all agreed it was one hell of a good idea.

"I knew I promoted you for a reason," Edge told him.

International News Wire

Confederate Army Provisional Press Release

Confederate Army Provisional Forces in South Carolina have arrested six of their soldiers from that State in connection with the reported homicide of two United States Army enlisted personnel, believed to have been captured by their unit. The bodies have not yet been found, and the suspects are currently being held without bond, pending further investigation. More details will be forthcoming as the investigation continues. Anyone with information, please contact your local Confederate Army Provisional Commander.

South Carolina Evening News

A pair of teenagers out for a drive made a grisly discovery this afternoon when they found the bodies of two as-yet unidentified women in a wooded area just off a back road near Patrick this afternoon. The cause of death has not been released pending an autopsy, but according to a source within the Chesterfield County Sheriff's Department, who spoke to our reporters on the condition of anonymity, both women had been shot. Also, due to certain factors in the condition of the bodies, sexual assault is suspected.

When asked if the deaths may be related to those mentioned in a Confederate Army Provisional press release earlier today, Sheriff John Stone's only comment was, if the Confederate Army Provisional had any information or was holding any suspects in the two women's deaths, they should turn them over to the Chesterfield County Sheriff's Department or to officers of the South Carolina Law Enforcement Division...

United States Military Veterans' Internet Chat Room

Sarge4life: *Did you catch that? The CAP press release about the arrests came out four hours before the cops announced they'd found the bodies. Have you ever seen anything like that in a guerrilla army?*
Jranger: *I've never seen anything like that in a regular force. Hell, no one ever says anything about something like this unless it gets out; they definitely don't bring it out themselves!*
Sarge4life: *Especially not the high command. This thing supposedly came straight from Samantha Gore, their information officer.*
Jranger: *It beats the hell out of me. One thing about it though, it makes them come out smelling like a*

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rose.
Sarge4life: *You think maybe that was the reason they did it?*
Jranger: *Probably, but even if it is, I only wish our side had that much honesty and good sense.*
Sarge4life: *Amen, brother!*

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CHAPTER 5

"I want you to know I'm here under protest!"

"I'm well aware of that, ma'am," Frank told the furious woman standing in his office. "I assumed that was why my men had to forcibly detain you and bring you in handcuffs."

South Carolina's Chief Medical Examiner, Doctor Kathy Yonker, was more than a little put out. The attractive forty-five year-old blonde was far more used to giving orders than to taking them. A crime-solving zealot who believed it was her calling in life to be the voice for the dead who could no longer speak for themselves, she ran her office and laboratory like a crack military unit, and woe betide the underling who gave anything less than their absolute best. She had stood up to cops and prosecutors and even the governor a few times, and they had all backed down from the woman's razor-sharp tongue and the terrier temper that was all out of proportion to her somewhat diminutive five-foot three-inch height and hundred pounds of weight. She supposed she must have gotten complacent about it, because this time it hadn't worked at all. When she flatly refused to come with the tough-looking men who identified themselves as Confederate guerrillas – *Excuse me, Confederate Army Provisional!* – she promptly found a ball gag stuffed in her mouth, her hands and feet shackled, and a blindfold over her eyes, followed by a long, very uncomfortable ride in the back floorboard of an extended cab Chevrolet pickup instead of sitting in the seat where she would have been if she hadn't insisted on keeping up the struggle. They had handled her very carefully despite her furious struggles, so the only thing injured was her dignity, which only made it that much worse.

She was really beginning to worry that she might have overdone it, and that worry turned to fear when they pulled out the gag, unshackled her and left her in a room, closing the door behind them. Yanking off the blindfold in the middle of a profane tirade, she was confronted with the none other than the infamous Rebel General Frank Gore, standing on the other side of the desk right in front of her, waiting for the others to leave the room. In a moment they did, leaving her alone with the man the press portrayed as a monster.

Oh shit! Don't show weakness! Don't let him know you're afraid!

She hadn't; instead she had uttered her protest, and then realized how lame it sounded when she saw the guerrilla general's humorous grin, like he found the situation funny as hell.

No, not really; he thinks it's a little funny, maybe, but his eyes...he's troubled.

"What do you want with me?"

He gestured toward the chair beside her with his left hand.

"If you'll take a seat, Dr. Yonker, we can discuss that very thing."

She thought about refusing, and then realized that would do nothing besides aggravate the situation and make her legs even more fatigued. She had been on her feet much of the day already, and her impromptu ride hadn't been very conducive to resting, so she sat, and crossed her legs.

"Can I get you a drink, Doctor?"

"Just say what you've got to say!"

He shrugged, with that irritating grin still in place.

"Okay; we need your help."

Oh no!

"Look, I've already got Homeland Security and the military breathing down my neck, and I'll tell you the same thing I told them; I'm not getting involved in this damned war of yours – "

"I'm not asking you to get involved in the war," he said, raising his voice over hers and cutting her off, "I'm asking you to get involved in solving a double murder."

Her brow furrowed in surprise, and she quickly realized what he was talking about.

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"I take it you're referring to that pair of female "Jane Does" that were mentioned in your press release?"

"Yes ma'am, I am."

"Why do you care?"

He took in a deep breath, puffing his bearded cheeks and blowing them out again.

"Because some of my men have been accused of their murders."

Green eyes narrowing as her lip curled in disgust, she snarled, "And you want me to help you cover it up!"

Kathy Yonker suddenly rocked back in her chair as if she had been struck. Frank hadn't hit her; in fact, he hadn't moved at all, but his face had changed as abruptly as if someone had dropped a curtain in front of them, a curtain with death written all over it in big, bold capital letters. As part of her job as medical examiner, she had faced some of the worst murderers there were on the witness stand in court, but she couldn't recall ever seeing a fury like this one. The most frightening thing about it was that it was not a hot rage that possessed him, but a cold one, that left him with all the mercy of a glacier apparent in his tight, battered features and icy gray eyes. Suddenly she was very, *very* afraid.

Every word that slashed out of his mouth was separate and clipped.

"I do not cover up for rapists and murderers, Doctor. I want to know if they did it, so I'll know whether to hang them or not. It's that simple."

She nodded and swallowed hard, not trusting herself to speak since she knew her voice would come out as a high-pitched squeak from guitar string-tight vocal chords. He reached down and picked up a small plastic case that she realized was a fishing tackle box, and placed it on the desk between them.

"This case contains twelve numbered containers, each one with blood, semen, and pubic hair samples from a different man; the six suspects, plus six more; twice as many with no names attached, just to keep it fair. I want to know which, if any of the men who supplied these samples had any part in the abuse and deaths of these women, and I want to know ASAP."

Swallowing hard, she found her voice once more.

"You...you really do care about this, don't you?"

"Yes, ma'am, I care. That's why I do what I do; if I didn't care, I wouldn't waste my time with fighting this damned war, let alone worrying about two dead enemy soldiers."

The Medical Examiner suddenly noticed a smile creeping across her own face before she was fully aware of it. Here was someone in power who seemed to care about the dead, just as she always had. And here was one who also cared about the living; she could feel the power of the man and his truth in those few words. The feeling was akin to a religious experience, almost a revelation, as she realized that maybe, just maybe, there might be a glimmer of hope for the world after all...at least for the Southern part of it.

"I'll do it. How do I contact you?"

"We'll contact you. Please, as soon as you can, have copies of the autopsy reports and sample comparisons ready, and we'll send someone to pick them up."

"Will I need to testify?" For the life of her, she wasn't sure how she could get by with testifying in a guerrilla trial, but she was willing anyway. Frank shook his head.

"No, that won't be necessary. Taking part in a Confederate Army Provisional military tribunal would destroy your career and make you a fugitive, and you're far more valuable to the State of South Carolina right where you're at. We'll accept your written oath that your findings are accurate to the best of your ability in lieu of testimony, and if there are any further questions, we'll forward them to you." Seeing her startled expression, he smiled and added, "Your reputation as someone who seeks justice and speaks for the dead precedes you, Doctor, and it is impeccable. We trust you to do the right thing, whatever that may be."

Kathy suddenly seemed to find something irritating in the corner of her eye, and wiped at it with a finger.

"You could always kidnap me again," she said, only half in jest, and he smiled at her.

"How about we just send you a video of the trial? That would be a lot easier, logistically speaking." Pursing his lips, he added, "We'll still have to blindfold you before they take you back for security reasons, but I think we can dispense with the shackles and gag this trip, don't you?"

"Yes, I think we can do without that. By any chance, before I leave, does that offer of a drink still stand?"

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Laughing, he reached into the desk drawer for a bottle while asking, “What kind of man would refuse a lady a drink?”

As she sipped the raw clear liquor from a chipped coffee cup, the Doctor reflected that this ray of hope before her was worth a trip in the floorboard of a truck any day of the week.

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CHAPTER 6

At one time, the large brick factory on the outskirts of Camden had been a textile mill, and swarmed with dozens of workers, 24-7. Now it was an empty shell in vacant parking lot on the outer edge of town, with hardy grass growing up unnoticed through the cracks in the concrete of the vacant parking lot. The place had been empty for years, with all its equipment long stripped out and sold for cash; pigeons and sparrows flew unhindered in and out thorough the jagged openings of its broken windows, and nested in its nooks and crannies.

Then, a month ago, a company suddenly leased the building from its surprised but very grateful owners, and began storing giant bales of cardboard and paper for recycling. The recycling company was real, recently started by a Columbia attorney, but it hardly needed that much space. Instead, its owner, a Confederate sympathizer, had done it as a favor for General Frank Gore. Archer Neil was happy to do it; after all, his niece was none other than Cynthia Dover, Samantha Gore's executive assistant-cum-bodyguard, and the Confederate Army Provisional had not only gotten the HIV medication that kept her alive, but had also rescued her mother Carla – Archer's sister – from an internment camp in West Virginia. The attorney owed them two lives, and, even if he hadn't been a Southerner and a supporter of the Cause, he was still a man who prided himself on paying his debts.

Still, nobody else needed to know that, so Archer simply "hired" a few of the guerrillas who weren't on the Feds' wanted lists, and they began bringing in a small but steady number of cardboard bales. One of the best things about the huge bales he dealt in was their size; hollowed out, several people could fit inside one of them comfortably. So, as the trucks came and went through the big rollup doors, more and more people were left behind inside when they pulled away...like the trio who stepped out of one of them as soon as the front was cut off to allow access.

The man was in his thirties, of average build with sandy hair, large jug ears, and open, honest features, but with a calculating look in his green eyes. The woman looked to be about the same age, with hair a shade or two darker, and with a lean build and much more delicate, attractive features than her companion. The youngest of the three was a pretty teenaged girl, with wide, frightened blue eyes and her wavy blonde caught up behind her in a ponytail.

"It's good to see you again, Frank!" Colonel Jack Boggess, Commander of the West Virginia Theater, said sincerely as he pumped the General's hand up and down before slapping him on the shoulder, "It's been too long!"

Frank had to agree; he had missed the jug-eared Mountaineer as well. Typical of the "hillbilly" stock that made up his lineage, he was quietly good humored but suspicious by nature; the one-time union mineworker didn't give his friendship easily, and Frank was honored to have it.

"It has been awhile. Have you been keeping yourself busy up there?"

"Oh yeah; of course, with all the mountains and woods, we've got an easier time of it terrain-wise than you do down here in the flat lands." Turning to the Sammie, he stuck out his hand, but she shook her head.

"After you sent Cynthia's mother back to her, that's not going to do it and you know it!" she said as she hugged him. He grinned broadly when she let go, and motioned at the two women coming out of the bale behind him. "Get on up here; I've got a couple of people I want you to meet."

No one missed the haunted, frightened look in the blond teenager's eyes, or the way her pretty thirty year-old companion took her hand to lead her forward. Nodding her head and making her short brown hair wave, she said, "It's all right, honey; they're friends." The girl swallowed hard and nodded, allowing herself to be led.

"Sammie, Frank," Jack said, "this my fiancée, Philindy Storm, and my...my...hell, this is Tiffany Johnson.

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Tiff's, well, pretty much our adopted daughter now, I reckon, even if we haven't been able to do the official paperwork on it. Girls, these are my friends, Frank and Sammie Gore."

All of them knew better than to ask the story; besides, they had heard through the grapevine that Jack had taken up with a lady he had rescued from the internment camp in Point Pleasant. The fact that they had been in Federal custody and the way the girl clung to her told them all they needed to know.

"I'm pleased to meet you," Frank told them sincerely, reaching out and shaking Philindy's hand. "Philindy; that's a pretty name, but it's one I'm not familiar with. I guess your dad must have wanted a boy, huh?"

She grinned and dryly remarked, "Gee, I've never heard that one before!"

Frank laughed out loud at that, and told Jack, "You'd better hold onto this one! I like her!" And he did, too; it was good to meet a stranger who didn't treat him like he was some sort of demi-god...or in the case of the enemy, some sort of demon.

Turning to the young blond, Frank treated her to his most sincere smile, but he didn't reach out to her physically. He'd dealt with liberated captives enough to know to leave the first move up to them.

"Tiffany, it's nice to meet you."

Tiffany swallowed hard and licked her lips nervously. "It...it's nice to meet you too, General Gore, sir." She paused, then added, "You're famous."

Frank kept the smile on his face, but only with a lot of effort. Tiffany had regressed, presumably due to her ill treatment, until her body language and speech patterns were more like someone of seven or eight, rather than fifteen.

Damn it, it's enough to break your heart!

He had seen it before, of course, many times, but some things there are no getting used to. Every time, his hatred for the enemy blazed up, and he renewed his determination to create a country where that kind of thing didn't happen. For the sake of every girl like Tiffany, like Donna, and for the future of his own little girl, he would do this, or else he would die in the attempt.

He refused to let any of that show on his face, and instead maintained his open, friendly mask, albeit with difficulty.

"I don't know about the famous part, honey, but I'd appreciate it if you'd just call me Frank."

She managed a fragile smile. "Thank you...Frank." Then she flinched back a little, as if expecting a blow.

Samantha felt like she was being torn apart inside as she watched the exchange, and couldn't take it any more; it was either speak or burst into a fountain of tears.

"And I'm Samantha, but you can call me Sammie."

It was obvious the girl was much less nervous around a woman, because she tentatively reached out and took her hand.

"You can all me Tiff. My friends do..." She paused, suddenly unsure if she had offended. "I-I mean...if..."

"I'd be honored to be your friend, Tiff; we all would," Samantha told her and opened her arms slightly, and the next minute Tiffany was hugging her. Samantha was suddenly reminded of another frightened teenaged girl who had hugged her the same way when Frank and Sam brought her home. She was not much older than Tiffany when she died in battle, trying to protect Samantha. Thinking of Kerrie O'Brien laying there spread-eagled in the South Carolina mud with a bullet hole in her head, Samantha blinked rapidly and let go with her right hand to wipe at her eyes that suddenly seemed to have something in them, and, as soon as she lowered it, Philindy stepped up and took it in both of hers. She didn't know what was wrong, but she knew something was; she had had more than a few episodes just like that herself.

"Thank you for making her welcome," she said quietly, and Samantha squeezed her palm with genuine affection and appreciation in return as the feeling subsided a little.

"You're just as welcome, all of you."

In the meantime, Jack was looking around.

"I hear you two have a daughter of your own."

"Linda," Frank told him proudly, and the West Virginian nodded.

"Yeah; I want to see this little bundle of joy while we're down here."

"Ha! I don't think you'd get out of here without that," he said with a laugh. "She's asleep right now;

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Vika's looking after her."

Jack's brow furrowed in concentration, trying to place the name.

"Vicky?"

"Vika – Victoria Slastyonoff, Edge's fiancée."

His eyes widened. "The Russian girl? I've heard about her, but I didn't know she was here with you all."

Frank was too tactful to mention that Victoria would undoubtedly appreciate being called a girl, since she was forty-one, six years older than Boggess himself, even though she didn't look it at all. Instead, he said, "Since Edge travels so much, she's attached to my headquarters most of the time, and she's been a real asset here."

Jack laughed. "Doggone, Frank, when did you turn Islam? You're building a regular harem for yourself here." He pointedly looked around some more. "Where's that other little girl you all used to pal around with?"

"Cynthia's on com duty," Samantha told him, but he shook his head.

"No, I get to hear about Cynthia all the time from Possum – Sergeant Hall, the one who brought her mother down here; he and Carla are sweet on each other. I mean the other one, that pretty little girl with reddish hair and the big blue eyes, kind of sad..." He snapped his fingers as the memory came to him. "Kerrie, that was her name! I haven't heard anything about her lately; is she still with you all?"

When he saw the agonized look Frank and Samantha exchanged, he knew before she told him.

Ah, hell!

"Kerrie's dead, Jack. She was right beside me when we charged that prisoner barracks; she..." Suddenly she put a hand to her mouth and began crying, and Philindy hugged her along with Tiffany, who hadn't let go and simply squeezed tighter. That little exchange had been enough to make Jack's fiancée realize that this Kerrie O'Brien she had never met had meant as much to the Gores as her own little teenaged addition did to her and Jack.

Jack looked down and took off his cap, angrily slapping it against his leg.

"Damn it!" he spat. "I really liked her, you know?"

"We all did," Frank told him, looking away for a moment, reflecting that, all too often, that was the only eulogy a Rebel guerrilla ever got. "She had that effect on people."

There was an uncomfortable silence, then Frank said, "Come on; let's get you all settled in. We've got plenty more folks coming; you're the first judge here."

Doctor Kathy Yonker's head jerked up from a set of toxicology reports when she heard the polite knock on her office door. That wasn't unusual these days; lately she had been jumpy, starting at every sound. It wasn't her kidnapping by the Confederate guerrillas so much, although that had been a cold, hard slap in the face with her own mortality, considering what *could* have happened. That, at least, was for a good cause, and had implanted a dream within her of a better society that made her almost giddy at times. What made her nervous – *All right, it scares the living shit out of me!* she admitted to herself – was what would happen to her at the hands of the Federal forces if they found out about her involvement. That didn't bear thinking about, which was exactly why she couldn't stop doing exactly that.

Part of her wished she had never become involved, but she pushed that voice away. There were murders to solve, so she had no choice. That was her life's work. It was more than what she did; it was who she was!

"Come in."

The door swung open and she felt a little instinctual twinge of fear run up her spine on pointed little spider feet at the sight of Columbia's Police Chief, John Carter, but she instantly pushed it aside. The Feds wouldn't send the locals, of whom they were increasingly distrustful, and they certainly wouldn't have knocked. Instead, they would have kicked her door in and taken her, and shot any of her staff who dared to get in the way.

Carter nodded slightly to her in greeting, his cap with its gold badge politely held in his left hand, the same one that held his cane, and to her surprise, he looked as nervous as she was.

"Dr. Yonker? May I speak with you for a moment?"

She frowned slightly at his unexpectedly differential attitude. She had had a speaking acquaintance with the

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Chief for many years, back before he had been the SWAT team captain, and, if anything, he had tended to be a little too self-confident in attitude and overly blunt in speech. They had butted heads more than once, but she couldn't afford any undo attention now, so she was determined to keep it civil, whatever he wanted and however much that went against her nature.

"Of course, Chief."

He turned to close the door, and she couldn't help but notice he glanced both ways along the hall before doing so.

He's as paranoid as I am! What in the world does he want?

She didn't have long to wait. Turning back to her, he took a deep breath, and said, "I need copies of the autopsy reports for Frank."

Swallowing hard, he thought, *God, I hope their information about her was accurate, or I'm a dead man!* Not that he was particularly afraid to die, but neither was it something he looked forward to.

As for Kathy, all she could do was stare at him in shock, her mouth hanging wide open. Finally, she managed to stammer, "Y-you know…about…m-m-me?"

Carter's shoulders visibly dropped as the tension ran out of them at her reaction, and he even managed a small, tight smile of relief.

"Yes ma'am, and now it looks like you know about me too."

His smile must have been contagious, she realized, because she had caught it too, and hers was as full of relief as his, not just at the fact that he had not come to arrest her, but that she was not alone in this thing. Waving a hand at the guest chair even as she began rising, she asked, "Please…sit down for a few minutes, if you have time. I'd really like to talk to someone who…*knows*."

He nodded and told her, "Believe me, so would I."

Their conversation went on for nearly an hour, each one almost overcome with relief at being able to openly discuss their secret status. It pulled them closer by necessity, and soon they were on a first name basis, and she asked the question she had been pondering ever since her meeting with the guerrilla General.

"John, I've only met him once, but you used to work with him. What kind of a man if Frank Gore? I mean really?"

"He's one of a kind," he said, shrugging as he tried to explain it, "He's scrupulously honest, intensely idealistic, and extremely practical, all at the same time."

"I would think all those things would tend to cancel each other out."

"With most men they would, but not with him, although they sure kept him in trouble on the Department. They got him kicked off the SWAT Team for one thing, and nearly fired altogether."

Leaning forward, eyes widening with interest, she said, "Tell me about it."

"Do you remember about five years ago, that big hostage situation in the grocery store on the north side when that robbery went bad?"

"Yes. I was the one who did the autopsies."

"All three of the suspects were killed by Frank Gore."

"What? There must have been a hundred cops there during that standoff!"

"Every bit of it, but there was only one Frank. He was my team sniper.

"See, those three had already killed two and wounded another one during the holdup itself, and they were holding eight hostages. They were threatening to kill them all, and Frank was the only one who had a perfect view of one of the big glass front windows that gave him a clear line of fire on all three. We had the negotiators there, but they were getting nowhere, and the perps decided to pass the time by raping one of the hostages, a young woman of twenty."

"I didn't know that!" she exclaimed, and Carter nodded.

"You weren't supposed to, Kathy; no one was supposed to, or heads would have rolled. If you recall, the robbers were Black, and the city was under investigation by the Justice Department at the time over allegations of racism. Big Jim Perkins was Chief then, and didn't want to aggravate the situation, so he gave orders that no one was to fire unless they actually started killing the hostages.

"Well, when they stripped that girl's clothes off and threw her on that table, Frank's voice came over the

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radio one more time. *'Have all three suspects targeted; request permission to engage.'* Perkins said, *'No,'* and then it was over. *BAM! BAM! BAM!* Three shots in less than three seconds, and…well, you autopsied the bodies."

"I remember," she said with a nod, "All three died on the scene, one from a single gunshot to the head and the other two of single wounds in the upper torso. And you fired him from the team for that."

"No, I fired him from the team for disobeying orders, even though he was absolutely, unequivocally right to do so. It wouldn't have been so bad if he had been like any other officer, and said, *'My weapon went off,'* or *'I thought they were getting ready to shoot one of the hostages,'* or the usual, *'Sorry; my radio signal was breaking up and I thought you authorized it.'* He could have gotten by with any of that, and received nothing more than a serious ass-chewing. But Frank told the truth. *'I wasn't going to let them rape that girl when I had a chance to stop it."*"

"I'm surprised he kept his job at all."

"Perkins wanted to fire him, but he was afraid of what he would say. You've got to remember, the Chief was more of a politician than he ever was a policeman. If Frank had told the media that he was fired for having disobeyed orders to let a bunch of gangsters go ahead and gang rape a young White girl, the White people in this city would have turned on the administration and demanded his ouster, and the mayor would never win another election unless he did it. On the other hand, he also knew good and well what the media reaction would be to a White police officer shooting three Black suspects who were preparing to rape a White woman; they would have called it 'nothing short of a racist execution.'"

She made a disgusted sound.

"I get so sick of that crap!"

"So do I; however, it's reality, so it was easier for Perkins to say he authorized the shots because the suspects were preparing to execute all the hostages. There was a little stink, but since some of the hostages were Black, it didn't get too bad. As for Frank, he was ordered never to discuss it with anybody and he was put back on street patrol. I know it hurt him being taken off the team like that, but he just looked at me and shrugged. *"That's fine,"* he said, *"I can accept the transfer a lot easier than I could have just sat there and watched that. I've got to face God someday, and I worry a hell of a lot more about His good opinion of me than that of the Columbia PD."*

"So now you know what I mean about Frank. He's honest to a fault, he will always do what he thinks is right, and he will do it the most efficient way possible. I don't know about you, but, while I admire it, it also scares the hell out of me."

Lowering her eyes to her desk, she poked at a piece of paper there for a moment before telling him, "It scares me too," then adding the question that was eating at her. "So, what kind of a leader does all that make him?"

Carter looked straight at her and said, "The best kind, a kind none of us in this country have seen for a long, long time…if he lives."

"Yeah," she said, "there is that."

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CHAPTER 7

Chinese News Service

A spokesman for the Confederate Army Provisional has issued a press release concerning the trial by military tribunal currently underway for the six soldiers accused of sexual assault and murder in an incident involving two enemy prisoners of war. According to the statement, international observers and members of the international press are present in the courtroom. The highest leadership of the Southern rebel forces is not, having distanced themselves from the proceedings and leaving the process to regular military justice via a panel of judges selected from throughout their forces, although they are doubtless taking a deep interest in this case, as is the rest of the world.

The United States has threatened the arrest of anyone caught participating in or attending the trial, and continues to demand that the accused be turned over to them. There doesn't seem to be much chance of that happening…

Tiffany Johnson sat on the rusty metal grating that formed the last of a set of steps ending at the old factory's ground floor, thinking about things. She sometimes thought she did that too much, but she couldn't seem to help it.

At least the thoughts weren't bad right now.

That was a big step forward in itself, and she knew it. Here lately, she had sometimes gone for hours without thinking about what had been done to her. In fact, it had been nearly two whole weeks since she had woken up screaming in the night.

The fear was still there, of course, and she supposed it always would be, no matter how much she fought it and prayed for it to go away. The trip down, especially the part where they were riding blind inside the cardboard bale, had been more than a little frightening, and, even with Philindy cuddling her and Jack holding her hand, it had taken everything she had just to hold herself together and not start screaming.

But I did it, though!

She decided that wasn't all that much to be proud of, but right now she would take what she could get.

Still, in the end, the trip had been worthwhile. She had gotten to meet Frank and Sammie who were bigger celebrities than any movie star; they were actually legends in their own times, although it shocked her to the core to see that they were just as human as Jack and Philindy...just as human as she herself was.

Tiffany grinned tightly. Maybe everyone was a little too human, even down here. Besides what seemed like a small army of 1st South Carolina Irregulars and support personnel, there were officers in attendance from all over, and even two Councilmen, Sam Wirtz and Doctor Andrew MacFie. They had all been nice to her to a fault, especially the Gores and Sam, but they were so busy with the trial and everything surrounding it that they didn't have much time for her. As a result, she was stuck inside this old factory in a place she didn't know, and left pretty much on her own. Jack was presiding over that trial, Frank and Sam and Dr. MacFie had their own duties, and Philindy was somewhere in the complex with Sammie, who, being closer in age, was someone she could talk to. With nothing else to do, Tiffany sat there getting dirt all over the seat of her cut-off "Daisy Dukes" from the old step, her slender knees pressed together and feet spread apart, chin propped in one hand while the other fiddled with a stick she had picked up. She was bored, and really wished she had someone to talk to. She knew she'd be frightened of a stranger – she couldn't help that – but right now she'd welcome anyone friendly, or even indifferent, just to have someone to talk to.

Her grin spread just a little. There was one boy in particular, a member of Irregulars assigned to guard the

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factory, that she wouldn't be too scared of. She didn't know how he'd gotten into such an elite unit, because he couldn't be much older than she was. He was handsome, slender and muscular, and one of the few with really long hair, tied up in a blonde ponytail that reached halfway down his shoulder blades and made him look like a rock star. She'd always had a weakness for that, as evidenced by all the posters of rockers she had decorated her room with, back when she had had a real home and real live parents to go with it.

The corners of her smile turned downward, reversing themselves into a glum frown. He wouldn't talk to *her*, she was sure. After all, why would he? She was just some crazy girl who had been ruined by the things that had been done to her.

As he watched Tiffany sitting on the bottom step, idly scratching at the dirty concrete floor with a stick, off-duty Private Rick Carmichael shifted the old M16 slung over his shoulder, bumping his long blond ponytail with the barrel. He licked his lips and swallowed hard.

Damn, she's cute!

He didn't know what it was about her, but he thought she was the most attractive girl he'd ever seen. Not that he'd been alive long enough to see too many; still a few months away from seventeen, the slender, smooth-faced boy with his long "hippie" hair was the youngest of the Irregulars by several years, even though he was a veteran of the action at the schoolhouse and a dozen other places. The reason the Irregulars had taken the one they referred to as "the Kid" despite his youth and inexperience was that he had shown both brains and unusual courage, although right now, he was scared shitless.

God, what do I say to her?

Until he could figure that out, he was stuck with lurking out of sight behind the massive concrete support pillar, looking at her with covert longing.

"Pretty, isn't she?"

The masculine voice came from right behind him, and he jumped so hard his boots actually left the ground. He spun around, only to find that Frank Gore had walked up on him unnoticed, and his face turned bright red when he realized he had been caught looking, and by the General no less.

"S-sir! I'm sorry, sir!"

"Sorry about what, Private? Shoot, if I was your age and single, I'd be looking at her too. So, do you think she's pretty?" he asked again insistently, clearly intent on getting an answer.

"Yes, sir, I do," Rick confirmed with a nod and a longing glance back at the object in question, "I think she's beautiful."

"So, why aren't you over there talking to her right now instead of hiding back here behind this column like some kind of a stalker?"

Rick had been asking himself that very same question for the past few minutes now, and he still hadn't come up with a satisfactory answer.

"I don't know, sir. It's just...I'm scared, I guess."

"Son, you've been shot at, had grenades thrown at you, and even killed enemy soldiers in hand to hand combat; are you telling me you're scared of a little slip of a sixteen year-old girl?"

"No..." Rick reflexively began, and then his voice trailed off. "…well, yeah, I guess so, sir."

Frank grinned and patted the enlisted man's shoulder.

"Good; that shows you've got a little bit of sense anyway. Broken hearts hurt worse than any wound; believe me, I've had my share of both, and I know firsthand. The only thing that hurts worse is kicking yourself for years afterwards for something you didn't do when you had the chance. Besides, what did the Irregulars teach you about overcoming fear?"

Rick managed a grin of his own. His training had been in short intervals by necessity, but it had also been blunt and brutal, designed solely to produce results; there was no time and no room for anything else in that unit.

"They told me you have to face whatever you're afraid of, sir, and keep facing it until you finally beat it."

"That's right. So, what are you going to do when we finish this conversation?"

Glancing in Tiffany's direction, he swallowed hard and straightened up.

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"I reckon I'm going to go over there and talk to her, sir."

"Good man." Frank paused, thinking of the best way to put what needed to be said. "You were at the school with my wife when it was liberated, so you know what the women prisoners went through there, don't you?"

Rick knew very well; the things he had seen still haunted his nightmares on a regular basis, and his young face twisted into a savage snarl that made it look much older than his few years.

"Yes sir."

"All right. Colonel Boggess rescued that girl out of another prison camp up in West Virginia. I don't reckon I need to say anything else about that to you, do I?"

"Her?" He said, and then his features suddenly darkened even as the skin stretched white over his knuckles until it threatened to split. He bared his teeth and hissed, "Damn it, I'll kill those sons of bitches!"

"Relax, boy; Colonel Boggess and company already took care of that. I think she needs somebody to talk to, but the thing is, she's delicate, right now, emotionally. Do you understand that?"

"Yes sir," he said, looking back at the girl with sympathy in his eyes.

"What that means is that you don't get too free with your hands."

"Sir!" Rick said, shocked, "I wouldn't – "

"Yes you would," Frank interrupted, "I know, because I was your age once. Just remember, she's not some camp follower or guerrilla groupie, and I know you've got better sense than to try to actually *seduce* the stepdaughter of my guest and my personal friend..." He waited until Rick nodded his understanding of the implicit warning before continuing, "...but don't even reach out for her hand unless she wants you to. She might want someone to hold onto or she might not, but the first move is up to her. Got it?"

"Yes sir. You have my word." After a moment, he added, "Sir, what should I say to her?"

Frank shrugged. "If it was me, I'd ask her what she's doing sitting there all by her lonesome, ask her how she likes South Carolina, that kind of thing. After you talk to her for a while, offer to share your candy bar with her. Women love chocolate; they say it releases endorphins and makes them feel good."

Rick didn't know what the hell endorphins were, but whatever they happened to be, he fervently wanted to release a whole load of them...for all the good the idea would do him. With all the embargoes and the war, chocolate was so scarce and expensive in Dixie, a man was lucky to get his hands on a candy bar more than once a month, and seldom that.

"But I don't have a candy bar, sir."

Reaching into his shirt pocket, Frank produced a pair of Reese Cups in their orange wrapper and stuck it in the boy's hand.

"You do now. Now, get yourself over there before she wanders off."

"Yes sir!" Rick replied enthusiastically and took a step before stopping and turning back. "Thank you sir."

Frank waved his hand with a broad smile, motioning him on.

"You're welcome; now go on!"

Private Carmichael went, and Frank idly leaned against the column watching for a couple of minutes, and was both pleased and pleasantly surprised to see, after a short conversation, Tiffany smiling and scooting over so the young guerrilla could sit down on the step beside her.

Thank God! Good things and happiness are so rare these days, it's a real pleasure, a real privilege, just to see this.

Frank was still smiling when he turned, only to come face to face with a triumphantly grinning Sam Wirtz, who had slipped up unseen behind him.

"So help me, God," Sam told him, "if you ever give me any crap about being an old softy again, I'm going to tell everybody what you just did!" Stretching a hand up as if unveiling a marquee, he said, "You'll go down in history as Frank Gore, Rebel General and matchmaker!"

Confidently shrugging off his friend's threat, Frank said, "Nobody would believe you."

"We would."

Groaning inwardly, he watched Samantha and Philindy step out from behind a battered forklift parked only a few feet away where they had been spying too, and Sam had to clamp a hand over his mouth to keep from

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laughing out loud.

"Busted!" he teased in a sing-song voice before walking away, having thoroughly enjoyed himself, as well as having some juicy new gossip burning a hole in his pocket and aching to be spread.

"I know now why they talk about you the way they do," Philindy told him, "That was the sweetest thing I've ever seen!" She followed that with a hug, leaving Frank even more embarrassed than he already was. "I'll never forget what you did for poor Tiffany...she needed that!"

"Well, so did Private Carmichael. Look," he said nervously as she let go, "Jack doesn't need to know anything about this..."

His voice trailed off when he saw her nodding her head determinedly.

"Oh yes he does." She snickered and walked away, leaving him standing there, feeling like his face was on fire. Sam had already disappeared in the other direction, and he felt Samantha's arm slip through his.

"I guess no good deed ever goes unpunished," he grumbled.

"She was right, you know; I think that was about the sweetest thing I've ever seen too. I actually had tears in my eyes."

"Don't you start!"

"I will if I want," she said, teasing him, "Being able to harass you unmercifully is one of the privileges of being your wife, or haven't you heard?"

"All right, I give up."

"You'd just as well."

Sucking in his breath between his teeth and cocking an eyebrow, he told her, "I think I might owe you an apology."

"Why?"

"I originally traded for that candy bar for us."

Samantha glanced back at Tiffany and Rick, sitting together on the steps, eating the Reese Cups and giggling. "That's all right; joy is a heck of a lot rarer in this war than candy bars. By seeing you make them happy, you gave me something much better than candy; *sweeter* too," she added, unable to resist a final little dig. "Besides, it'll look better on her than on me anyway."

Taking her words as an invitation, Frank ran his eyes over her body, sliding them over her long legs, curved hips, slender waist, and large breasts. Samantha had been beautiful before the war, and to his mind was even more beautiful now; giving birth to their daughter had only enhanced her hips, in his opinion, and, from the guerrilla life they led, what little extraneous body fat she might have once possessed was long gone, replaced by lean, fit muscle. He returned his gaze to her face, just in time to catch her happy if slightly embarrassed grin at being evaluated and found more than perfect by her husband. Frank nodded even as his own lips crooked into a lecherous smile.

"I know what would look real good on you."

"What's that?"

Leaning over to whisper in her ear, he said, "Me."

"Franklin Gore!" she exclaimed in pretend shock, playfully slapping his shoulder, "You're awful!"

"That's what makes me so lovable."

Her blue eyes sparkled.

"Well, partly yes. Maybe we'd better make an early night of it this evening, you think?"

"Oh yeah," he nodded in agreement, "I think. In fact, I *definitely* think so."

Samantha blushed, did a little giggling of her own, and hugged his arm tighter as they walked on.

"You're off guard duty, Casanova; you've been reassigned."

Rick Carmichael raised his blond brows in surprise at Lieutenant Casey Graham, not just at his company commander's words, but at the shit-eating grin on his face. News travels fast in a unit, especially a closed society like a guerrilla band, and who was interested in who was always primary fodder for gossip and speculation, especially when it gave them a chance to break the monotony by aggravating the hell out of one of their comrades. Due to his youth, "The Kid" was always a favorite target; over the past few hours since he had

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been forced to reluctantly part from Tiffany because of his duties, Rick had taken a fair amount of good-natured ragging over what the other Irregulars referred to as his "moving in mighty quick on Colonel Boggess' daughter," and he wondered if he were about to become the butt of yet another joke.

"Reassigned, sir?"

"Yep; Colonel Wirtz' orders. You're to report to Colonel Boggess immediately; as of this moment, you are assigned as escort and body guard to Miss Tiffany Johnson for the remainder of her stay here." Seeing Rick standing there with his jaw hanging open, he added, "Well, don't just stand there, boy! Go get your shit together; anytime she is outside their assigned area, you are to be with her, making sure nothing happens to her. Think you can handle that?"

Once Rick found his voice again, the words came out through a broad grin of his own.

"Yes sir; I reckon I can handle that just fine! Thank you, sir!"

Casey tucked his thumbs in his belt, threw his head back, and laughed out loud as he watched Rick take off. The boy had too much pride to actually break into a run, but his immediate superior noted with amusement that he didn't miss it by much.

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CHAPTER 8

"I'm sorry I couldn't give you more notice, but I've asked you to this meeting so abruptly because it's the only time we're likely to get three Councilmen together at the same time for the foreseeable future. We have an opportunity here that is beyond my authority, and you will be acting as a committee to give it your yea or nay."

Sitting at the table watching and listening as Frank spoke, Doctor Andrew MacFie sipped his iced tea and nodded his bald head in approval, making his gray beard waggle. Not so long ago, Field Marshal Edge would have had the say-so on any idea, and the rest of them would have been cut out of the loop as being anything other than a rubber stamp for his decisions. Doctor MacFie would have liked to have had that kind of power himself, of course, but he couldn't deny that this more democratic process was at least a step up the ladder that would bring them closer to their goal.

I only wish I knew what Frank's going to ask for!

Flicking his eyes towards the other Councilmen seated to his left, Colonels Sam Wirtz and Jack Boggess – the latter having ordered a brief recess in the trial at Frank's request – he was pleased to see that they were obviously wishing for the same thing, and were just as much in the dark as he was. Frank usually did his best to be even-handed, and the fact that these two, who were much closer to him, were just as much in the dark as the professor soothed his notoriously volatile irritability a little.

Whatever was happening, he knew it must be important, because he had been asked to wear his suit, while Frank, along with Boggess and Wirtz who were commissioned officers, were wearing freshly pressed and starched gray fatigues, something the guerrillas did only on special occasions. Evidently they needed to impress somebody.

"I'm sure you're wondering what this is about," Frank went on, as if reading their minds, "so I'm not going to keep you guessing any longer. I'd like to introduce our guest at this time, Colonel Luther Van Hoot. Colonel Van Hoot is an Afrikaner mercenary commander, and is here as the spokesman for the Afrikaner community."

All of them sat up a little straighter with interest. Mercenary meant professional soldier, and any chance to bring some more high-grade help on board was not something to take for granted, although they all wondered what it would cost them.

Turning his back, Frank stepped away from the others and opened to door to the hallway.

"Colonel Van Hoot, please come in."

Well, Sam thought to himself as he watched the newcomer approaching, *he damned sure looks like a fighter.*

The graying Afrikaner filled his expensive suit like a cinderblock on legs, his stocky figure hard and nearly square with powerful muscles. He looked to be about sixty, but with a face creased and burned nut brown by decades of tropical sun and decorated with the pale lightning flash of a long-healed *panga* cut running diagonally across his features from his left temple to just the right of his chin, it was hard to put a definite age to him. His blue eyes looked as if they had faded, bleached out in the same sun that had darkened his skin, and were as hard as baked rock, showing no emotion.

No, that's not right! Sam knew the almost imperceptible signs in his body language, subtle though they may have been. If he had been in a poker game with the mercenary right now, Sam would have taken him to the cleaners. *He's desperate, and he's doing his best to conceal it!*

Frank shook the man's hand and then escorted him to the table, where their guest shook each councilman's hand in turn as they were introduced. With that out of the way, they all sat down, and it was then that Jack Boggess noticed that Frank had chosen a round table, plainly brand new and almost certainly brought in for the occasion. That way no one would be seen as being at the head or foot; there would be no worries about touchy

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Southern pride that way, and their guest would feel more at ease as well.

Frank obviously wants to make him welcome; I wonder what he's offering.

They didn't have long to wait; with the bluntness of his Dutch ancestors, the Merc got right to the point.

"We need a homeland, and we're willing to fight for you in order to get it."

The three heads belonging to the Councilmen swiveled towards Frank, and he nodded.

"Colonel Van Hoot is offering to field an entire battalion of fully trained and highly experienced mercenary soldiers on our side *immediately,* with more coming in as their preexisting international contracts run out, adding up to at least a brigade within the next year. In return, when we win," ('*if we win,'* he didn't bother to add) "he wants the White people of Africa to have the right to move here, to Dixie."

All three Councilmen were wide-eyed at the scope of both the offer and the price that was being asked.

"How many people are we talking about, Colonel?" Dr. MacFie asked.

"Approximately one million men, women and children."

While they were still shocked at the thought of that many foreigners coming in at all, let alone at once, Frank added, "Also, as part of the deal, every able bodied man will enlist in the Confederate military forces upon his arrival, as will the mercs already here. Not only will this give us substantial numbers, but many of these men are professional soldiers, already trained and with more actual combat experience than we could get from our own ranks; after all, fighting's what they've done for a living for decades. I don't have to tell you how much that kind of experience will be worth when it comes time to train our own peacetime army."

Even though all three would have looked at the projected influx and its potential cultural effect with a very jaundiced eye, the glaringly obvious fact that this was something Frank Gore wanted gave them pause. Jack pursed his lips in thought as he regarded the mercenary colonel.

"Why do you want to leave South Africa?"

"It's not only South Africa. Life for White people in Sub-Saharan Africa as a whole – but especially South Africa and the former Rhodesia – is becoming untenable. The *Kaffirs* are raping, robbing and murdering us everyday, all with impunity. What little we have left after their depredations is taken by the government in taxes to pay for social programs for the same ones who are killing us. If we wait too many more years, there won't be any of us left at all."

"But why here?"

"Because we are much alike, your people and ours. We have similar histories, similar religion, similar views. We are White people, just like you; Christians, just like you. We are farmers and miners, men of the soil, just like you."

Sam looked at him pointedly. "That's true; I'm familiar with your situation. It's also true that you have no place else to go, I believe."

Colonel Van Hoot nodded his head.

"Yes, that is also true. No other country in the world – no other White country – will take us, most not even as individuals, let alone as a group. Most of them are no longer fit to raise a family in anyway." His mangled lips split in a tight, slightly disturbing smile that didn't even pretend to reach for his eyes. "We're also desperate for that...just like you."

"Can't argue with that," Sam said.

The trio went silent, and Frank looked from one to another.

"Do you all have any more questions for the Colonel before you make your decision?"

All of them shook their heads, and Frank said, "Colonel, Lieutenant Drucci is waiting just outside the door. If you'll go with him, there's a cold beer waiting for you in the mess. I'll bring your answer to you as soon as we finish here."

The pair rose and shook hands.

"Thank you, sir," Van Hoot, said before turning to regard the others, "Thank you all."

As soon as the door closed behind their visitor, Frank asked the others, "So, what do you think?"

"I think..." Dr. MacFie's voice began, and then tapered off into a smile as he asked a question the old Dr. MacFie would never have thought of. "I think I'd like to know what *you* think, Frank."

"I think we're getting one hell of a deal."

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"But a million people?" Sam inquired, and Frank nodded.

"The South will lose many times more than that if we win. Not even counting those killed or starved during this conflict, do you think those millions of illegal aliens will be allowed to stay here?"

"Not in my state!" Boggess interjected at the same time MacFie declared loudly and with even greater vigor, "Not on my watch!" Seeing everyone looking at him, the eldest of their group went on.

"I already have a plan in place to deal with that issue, but if I tell you, I'll have to insist that it not leave this room." MacFie waited until they all assented before proceeding; this was *his* plan, and he wanted to make certain no one else – such as Jonathon Edge – stole it, along with the political capital it would gain him. "The illegal aliens will definitely be removed, but that's only the beginning. I intend to void all refugee and amnesty agreements as well, excepting only the Cubans in Florida – too many of them have been actively supporting us to just cut them loose – and not recognize birthright citizenship to anyone born in our country whose parents were here illegally. It will be retroactive to the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, and cover all immigrants that would have been forbidden by the Johnson-Reed Act of 1924. In other words, it will apply primarily to non-Europeans, excepting those who few who have actively supported this revolution."

"Damn! Boggess said, "That's pretty ambitious. What do you intend to do with them?"

"The illegals will be repatriated to their own countries or anywhere else we can dump them, and as for the rest...well, their agreement was with the United States; the Somalis and Haitians and amnestied Mexicans and the like can all go there."

"Good Lord!" Sam exclaimed, and Frank nodded his understanding.

"Our enemies will be destroyed, or at least rendered no longer a threat; they won't be able to afford it. You intend to flood them with what is essentially a parasitic class numbering in the tens of millions; people who take more from the system than they give, who are generally high on crime and low on intelligence, except for the Asians anyway."

"I'm not too concerned about the Asians right now; as you just pointed out, they're not a major problem, some of them have been generally supportive and nearly all the rest neutral. Anyway, there aren't that many of them compared to the wetbacks, nor do they bring the same problems.

"I also intend to reduce the Black population by more than half, by expelling all habitual criminals, and by cutting off all welfare, food stamps, and related programs for an extended period of time. They'll beat it for the North just as fast as they can go; the only ones left here will be the most intelligent and law abiding, which, for the most part, will be the older ones, past child-bearing age or near enough to it." He was unable to suppress a self-satisfied smile. "I don't have to tell you gentlemen what effect that will have on the South's demographics, both immediately and in the long term.

"I'm really glad we shot Herdman instead of you."

MacFie glanced at Frank and grinned. "Believe me, son, so am I." Tapping the table with his index finger, he added, "We're looking at losing about twenty percent of our population, and maybe even as much as thirty or even forty percent, depending how many Yankee transplants and Southern scalawags will be following them home, and I hope those liberals and flag-waving neo-cons don't let the door hit them in the ass on their way out. Still, with them gone, we'll need more people just to do the work to keep our infrastructure going, and these Afrikaners will be a Godsend. No doubt we'll be taking in a lot more White immigrants from various countries too, and I'm sure we'll be able to use all of them and then some."

"But what about the cultural pollution?" Sam asked, then tried to blunt the harshness of what he had said, "Not that there's anything wrong with the Afrikaners as such, but these people are going to be bringing in their own language, culture, and ways of doing things that are alien to us. I don't want to save the South just to destroy it afterwards."

"I don't know," MacFie admitted, "That troubles me too, but I haven't figured out a solution yet."

"The solution to pollution is dilution."

Frank's sudden and unexpected burst of rhyming got all of their attentions, and Sam asked, "Excuse me?"

"Something I learned in high school chemistry class. The solution to pollution is dilution, spreading something's effects out over a greater volume rather than allowing it to concentrate in one spot. It's like watering down a drink; the more water you put in a glass compared to the whiskey, the weaker the effects."

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Leaning across the table to make his point, Frank said, “It’s my opinion that, as part of the immigration agreement, we select which states the newcomers who are not military or military dependents go to, and there they will remain until they become citizens. You said it yourself; we’ll need more than just the Afrikaners, and no doubt we’ll be getting more immigrants from every White country out there. Taking that as a given, it’s not in our interest to do what essentially amounts to handing over political power in key areas by allowing the formation of Little Pretorias, Little Moscows, Little Parises, or whatever. If we force them to spread out from the very beginning, not only do we keep the political power in the hands of our own people, but the separation from large numbers of their own kind will force the immigrants to assimilate that much faster, and smooth out the process for them ultimately becoming part of our people, which, I believe, is the goal.”

“Frank,” Dr. MacFie said in all seriousness as the younger man quickly solved a problem he had been wrestling with for months, “you’re a genius!”

The General was still blushing when Sam said, “You know some of the states are going to pitch a fit about that, don’t you? They’ll be saying you’re violating their rights by deciding which people get to come there.”

“Not at all; the states themselves will make that decision, and they’ll like it if it’s put to them the right way. All we have to do is make certain they know that they don’t have to take any immigrant from any country if they don’t want to; that’s their part of it. The central government will simply look at the immigrant population from any particular country in the states, and pick from a list of states that have the lowest per capita numbers and are still willing to accept them.”

“It makes sense to me,” Jim Boggess declared, and everyone else was forced to agree.

Dr. MacFie smiled and said, “Well, I guess you’d better go tell Colonel Van Hoot we accept his offer.”

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CHAPTER 9

Closing Arguments,
Colonel Charles Carnes, Prosecutor
Official Confederate Army Provisional Court Marshal Record

"There is no question that the four primary defendants in this case committed the crimes they are accused of: rape and murder, mutiny, disobeying a direct order, concealment of evidence, perjury, assault and battery, and witness intimidation. The evidence is very clear; even the defense admits this, because it has no other choice. The DNA on and in the bodies of the raped and murdered women is theirs, the bullets in the victims are theirs, fired from their rifles, and we have two witnesses to the crime, in the form of Private Daniels and Lieutenant Morrow. Theirs is an open and shut case, and the best the defense has to offer is to ask for mercy due to the extenuating circumstances of war.

"Sirs, I know war; one look at me will tell you I know it better than most. All of you know war, and know what it does to men inside. The defense says there is a monster inside all of us, aching to climb out, and that is true. But it's equally true that neither you, nor I, nor any of the thousands of other soldiers bravely serving the Confederate Cause have let it come out like this. This is beyond the pale, beyond the standards of civilized behavior even in war time, and definitely beyond the boundaries of the kind of nation we seek to recreate.

"I don't have to tell you what needs to be done with these men; you already know that, deep in your Southern hearts. There is one and only one penalty appropriate for what they have done. If you have any doubts, any at all, ask yourself this; what would President Davis, or Generals Lee or Jackson or Forrest or any other Confederate hero of ours do, and I think you will quickly find your answer.

"And then we come to their commander, Lieutenant Morrow…"

"All rise!"

Colonel Jack Boggess had reentered with his panel of judges following their brief deliberations. He, along with Major John Crockett of Tennessee, Captain Henry Haynes of Alabama, Lieutenant Joe Manson of Georgia, and Lieutenant Bill Hatfield of Kentucky resumed their seats. As they sat, so did everyone else, including the accuseds' reluctant, appointed attorney, Irregulars Captain Joel Harrison, and the acting prosecutor, Colonel Charlie Carnes. The only ones who remained standing were the squad of fully-uniformed and heavily-armed Irregulars under the command of Lieutenant Danny Drucci, who stood against the walls with silenced submachine guns at port arms, locked and loaded in case of problems. Jack resisted the urge to clear his throat before speaking.

"We have reached a verdict. Prisoners, rise and face the court." He waited until they obeyed before continuing.

"Sergeant Wells, Corporal Foster, Private Smith, and Private Amos, you have been found guilty of all charges. I'm tempted to go into a long-winded lecture about what you've done, but we all know there's no point. You have disgraced your cause, your army, your state, your comrades in arms, and yourselves, by behaving like barbarians – like *animals* – instead of like soldiers. We don't tolerate this sort of behavior from the enemy or from the civilian population, and I'll be damned if we'll tolerate it in our own ranks!"

He noticed his voice was becoming louder and louder, and he paused in order to force himself to be calm; that seemed to be happening a lot more these days, as the war ground away at his temper. When he managed it, his voice, once he began speaking again, was cold and mechanical.

"It is the unanimous decision of the officers of this court martial that you be taken to a place of execution at sunrise tomorrow, and be hanged by the neck until you are dead. Clergy will be made available to you in the

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interval, and I suggest you take advantage of it. May God have mercy on your souls."

The four were in such deep shock that they said nothing, only stared wide-eyed while the Irregulars snapped on the cuffs and led them stumbling away. Jack turned his gaze on their officer.

"Lieutenant Morrow, you are guilty of dereliction of duty, cowardice, two counts of being an accessory to assault, rape and aggravated murder, and conspiracy to obstruct justice."

"Sir," Morrow spoke up, "what did I do?"

"It's what you didn't do. You didn't stop them, either from the rape or murder, or for their assault and threats against Private Daniels when he tried to prevent this crime from taking place, and you didn't report the situation. They mutinied, and you did nothing."

"But what could I have done?"

Captain Haynes glared at him and snarled, "You could have shot them if necessary. I would have."

"Exactly," Jack added, ignoring his co-judge's speaking out of turn, "However, you chose to do nothing, which is not an option for a leader, a position for which you have proven yourself unfit. It is the decision of this court that you be taken from this court to a place of execution and hanged by the neck alongside your men until you are dead. May God have mercy on your soul."

"Hanged?" he exclaimed, and Jack nodded.

"Shooting is a soldier's death; something you're even more unfit for than the criminals under your command." Turning to the remaining Irregulars, he ordered, "Get him out of here!"

Morrow left with the others, and then it was Private Daniels' turn.

"Private Daniels, this court finds you not guilty on all charges, and commends you for your courage in risking your life by opposing the criminal actions of the former members of your unit, and by reporting those actions to Major Hawkins." Smiling tightly, he added, "On a personal note, any man who'll stand up and take a beating like you did to protect two women he doesn't even know, and enemy women at that, has my utmost respect." Jack saluted him and said, "Dismissed."

Daniels numbly saluted and left, staggering as much as the condemned men had, albeit for a different reason. Jack relaxed a bit then, and looked at the single enemy officer in the room.

Colonel Hiram Parsons was the highest-ranking United States prisoner of war in South Carolina, captured during an ambush by a Confederate Army Provisional unit not far from Florence. Frank had had him brought in as the other international observer, in addition to a low-level employee from the Syrian embassy, reporters from half-a-dozen countries, and a member of the French Red Cross, all of whom would doubtless be deported from the US as soon as word got out that they had been involved. Even though none of them were able to leave their assigned areas deep in the interior of the factory building, Parsons was the only one who was actually a prisoner. Still, he was the one Jack Boggess chose to speak to.

"Colonel Parsons, you'll be given the opportunity to attend the execution along with the other observers, if you so desire. Once it's been carried out, will you be satisfied that justice was done in this case?"

If Parsons, an Indiana native and United States Army career officer, had been shocked at the consideration shown him by being asked to be an observer in a Confederate Army Provisional court martial concerning the murder of US personnel, he was absolutely stunned at its outcome.

"Yes sir, I will. Thank you, Colonel, both on behalf of myself and my country."

"If we could only get your country to reciprocate in similar matters, we would all be better off."

Spreading his hands helplessly, Parsons said, "I don't set policy, sir; I can only speak for myself in that regard, but I can tell you that I have never abused a prisoner, nor let one under my control be abused."

Jack's smile had no humor in it whatsoever.

"We know that. Why do you think you're still alive?"

Once the POW and the observers had been removed, the officers relaxed. Frank and Samantha walked into the court trailed by Tommy and Donna while a couple of the Irregulars packed up the cameras, tripods, and other equipment they had been running. Lucky Charlie paused from putting away his paperwork when he saw Samantha, and looked around for her bodyguard.

"Where's Cynthia?"

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Samantha grinned back.

"I sent her for coffee; I figured we could all use some after that."

"I could use something a damned sight stronger than coffee right now," Sam observed dryly as he followed them inside in time to catch her words. If anything, Sam was angrier over the rape than Frank, if that were possible, but he lacked the certain hardness Frank had developed during the conflict, a hardness that left the younger man like a high stone wall: an unyielding barrier in front with nothing but mystery behind it. He knew seeing those men sentenced to death was hard. It was a necessity, of course, but still a hard one. Sam shot a glance at him, and saw no expression on his face.

I know he feels it...I hope he feels it.

"Frank," Tommy said quietly, "I'd like to be in charge of the execution squad."

Frank simply nodded and said, "All right."

Now there's one that feels it, only in a different way, Sam mused. It seemed he hardly knew the crippled biker anymore, although he couldn't blame him. Tommy hated a rapist – *any* rapist – and he had damned good reason. Sam just hoped that, in executing those four, he might execute a few of the demons in his own soul in the process, and bring him a little peace.

He snorted derisively at his own thoughts.

Killing for peace is a lot like fornicating for virginity; the whole concept is flawed from the very beginning!

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DAY 739

CHAPTER 10

United Arab Emirates News Network

The trial of the six Confederate soldiers accused by one of their own of the rape and murder of two female enemy prisoners of war ended in guilty verdicts for five of them, including their commander. All five were sentenced to death, a sentence which was carried out the following day. The remaining soldier was acquitted, and was praised for his courage in bringing the matter forward.

There were several outstanding things about this trial, the most notable being its transparency under very difficult circumstances. Unlike similar trials in the United States, which are not only closed to the public, but sometimes even have their very existence denied, the Southern Rebels made it a point to invite a diverse group of international observers that included a captured high-ranking US officer. The defendants were provided with an excellent defense counsel, but the evidence against them was overwhelming. Each one of them had been directly linked by their DNA to the rapes, so, with the testimony of the witness, the soldier who was acquitted, the case against them was overwhelming, and the just verdict swift and sure.

Through their spokespersons, the Vatican and several other human rights groups publicly urged that the Confederates not implement the death penalty, but those requests were politely but firmly denied. A spokesman for the Rebels said, "There are some crimes that only have one appropriate penalty, and this is one of them."

All of the press and international observers were allowed to watch the execution, although cameras or photographs of the process were strictly prohibited.

If nothing else, this trial has demonstrated to the world the Rebels' dedication to fairness and justice that many countries, some of them with far more resources at their disposal than the Confederates, would do well to emulate…

British News Service

"*Today we have with us Royal Marine Corps General Nigel Chatterley, retired. General Chatterley was visiting the troubled United States, and, on behalf of the BNS, secretly met with Confederate Army Provisional forces. He requested that he be allowed to observe the trial of the guerrillas accused of raping and murdering two female enemy prisoners so he could report his findings back to the UK, and that request was granted. General Chatterley, thank you for being here with us today.*"

"*Thank you for having me.*"

"*We've heard quite a bit about this trial from various sources; would you care to give us your first-hand impression of it?*"

"*Of course. As for the trial itself, as a career officer, I can only call it nothing short of miraculous. The whole thing was scrupulously fair to both the accused and the victims, and gave the impression that it was neither a drumhead court marshal with a foregone conclusion, nor a proceeding more concerned with the rights of the accused than with the victims; instead, the entire process seemed geared toward getting to the truth of the matter…something that our own court system might well take note of, if I may be so bold.*"

"*What struck you most about this event?*"

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"*More than anything else, I would have to say it was the presence of the prisoner of war, United States Army Colonel Parsons. Having a senior enemy POW not only observe the trial, but allowing him to speak in the beginning on behalf of the victims – his fellow soldiers – and even to attend the subsequent execution was something utterly without precedent in the annals of modern warfare. I must admit it makes me somewhat ashamed of the way we ourselves have done things over the years.*

"*So Colonel Parsons did attend the execution, then?"*

"*Yes; in fact, I was seated beside him in the section reserved for officers."*

"*The convicted prisoners were all hanged?"*

"*Yes."*

"*That brings up another point, sir; many of our viewers have expressed deep shock that you would willingly observe the deaths of five men…"*

"*I am a career military man, Mr. Smyth, and I have observed the deaths of thousands of enemy personnel on battlefields the world over, the vast majority of them good soldiers and decent men, and far less worthy of death than those criminals hanged by the Confederates."*

"*But, as I'm sure you know, both Britain and the European Union forbid execution under any circumstances, and consider it an atavistic, barbaric practice, which has no place in the modern world."*

"*I have seen far too much, and done too much myself over the course of my career to believe that, just because our government chooses to say something, it automatically follows that they are right."*

Columbia

Kathy Yonker smiled at John Carter when she answered her bell and found him standing in her doorway, dressed in a suit rather than his more usual police chief's uniform.

"John, I didn't expect you."

"I'm sorry," he said, "Is this an inconvenient time?"

"No, no," she assured him, shaking her head with perhaps more emphasis than she normally would have. After all, she had been secretly hoping he would make a return visit, although she had trouble admitting the reason to herself. "I wasn't expecting anyone, that's all. I just got off work and I'm a mess."

"I don't see a mess; I think you look beautiful this evening." The words came tumbling out before he thought about it, before he could stop them. Both of them were surprised, and anyone watching would be hard-put to tell which one blushed the deepest.

Kathy recovered first, and her eyes twinkled and crinkled at the corners.

"I like a man who says what's on his mind, even if he's lying through his teeth. Would you like to come in?"

"Yes, thank you." Holding up his brief case, he added, "Frank sent me; I brought the trial footage for you."

Her face fell just a little as she ushered him inside. "Oh. I thought this was a social call." She felt like kicking herself in the ass after blurting that out, but he grinned and cocked his head while he gave a little shrug.

"I was in hopes it might become one."

She reflexively started to come off with one of her usual caustic comments, but bit it back, nodded her head and admitted, with uncharacteristic shyness, "So was I."

"Good thing I came prepared then." He sat the case on the coffee table and opened it up, then produced a small but expensive box of candy.

"I hope you like chocolates."

"Only if you help me eat them."

"It's a deal."

"I'm really going to miss you, Tiff."

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When she turned her eyes up to his, Rick Carmichael was startled to see the girl was crying. He knew they had become close during the days the trial had dragged on...more than close, even though their displays of affection had never extended beyond hand-holding, maybe an arm briefly around her waist. Tiffany still had her problems and Rick was determined to make them better, not worse, and proceeded slowly. Of course he had all the libido of a typical teenager, and still more as a testosterone-filled combat soldier, but even without Frank's warning, he never thought much about attempting sex with her, no matter how badly he wanted to. He'd done it with a couple of other girls, but something inside him insisted that this one was more than just someone to "do it" with; she was something special, something worth keeping, but it was a surprise to him to find she felt the same way. Looking into her miserable, tear-filled blue eyes and the painful writhing of her mouth as she struggled to speak told him that, loud and clear.

It's goodbye, she thought, *I've had so much fun the past few days, and now…*

"I-I'll miss you, t-t-oo."

Rick reached out and took both her soft hands in his hard ones.

"Hey," he told her gently, "It'll be all right."

She sobbed especially loudly. "I'll never see you again!"

"You will too...if you want to."

"I do! You know I do, but...you're clear down here!"

"This war won't last forever!" Rick declared with a lot more confidence than he felt. He recalled a Russian proverb he and many of the other guerrillas had adopted from one of their Spetsnaz advisors: *Hope is the last thing to die.* Still, he reckoned if hope was the only thing he had left, he'd grab it and hold on. "Tourists make the trip back and forth all the time despite the fighting, and I'm not known, so I reckon I can do the same." He shrugged. "Besides, General Gore needs messages run up to Colonel Boggess once in a while, and I'll volunteer to do it every chance I get!"

She looked at him levelly, at least as best she could through her tears.

"You m-mean that?"

"Yes I do."

"You'd do that f-for...me?"

"There isn't much I wouldn't do for you, Tiff." He took a deep breath, then took a chance. "I love you; I kinda figured that would be pretty obvious by now."

Suddenly she surprised the hell out of him by throwing her arms around him and hugging him tightly for the first time, an embrace he was happy to return after a second or two of shock.

"I love you too! Promise me!" Tiffany whispered, her lips next to his ear, her warm breath swirling around it. "Promise me you won't let this be the end of it!"

"I promise!" he told her, and he meant it from the bottom of his heart, with all the "damn-the-torpedoes and full speed ahead" single-minded determination only the young and in love can manage.

Neither of them knew who moved first, but their lips pressed together hungrily and remained that way for a long time.

Frank, Samantha, Jack, and Philindy were standing forty yards away, waiting on the loading dock. They could see the two teenagers embracing in the shadows of the building, and they turned away to give them some privacy, as well as to hide their own satisfied smiles.

"That right there made this trip all worthwhile," Philindy said, dabbing at her eyes, and Jack nodded his agreement.

"I was afraid I'd never see her open up like that."

"She's still got a long way to go."

"Yes, but she's just taken the first step," Samantha observed, "just like you and I did after we were rescued, Philindy. I've found that one to be the hardest; once you finally get moving, inertia takes over." Seeing her husband looking particularly thoughtful, she asked, "What is it, Frank?"

Gesturing with a slight jerk of his head, he said, "They look like a picture, don't they? Like one of those old paintings of the young Confederate soldier going off to war, and kissing his sweetheart goodbye?" Pointing over his shoulder at the young couple with his thumb, he said, "Right there's the future; right there is what

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we're really fighting for: a world where kids barely old enough to shave don't have to go fight wars, and little girls don't have anything to get over worse than a broken heart or a bad hair day. I'll do whatever it takes to make that happen, whatever it takes to bring it about." Turning he looked back at Tiffany and Rick once more, still locked together at the lips and oblivious to the world, and his teeth bared in a smile at was at once joyous and fiercely determined. "Some ends justify any means. Whatever it takes, it'll be worth it!"

The three of them stood, staring at Frank and caught up in his magic carpet of words. Jack had seen the General's oratory power before, and Samantha had experienced it several times, but this was Philindy's first exposure, and she was in utter shock. This was no rehearsed political speech, but one torn from the simple heart of a complicated man, and its power was such she was caught up and carried along with it, a dream written in words so powerful it was made real, so real they could actually see it. She suddenly knew this was the voice heard from the mouths of prophets and crusaders, and they believed it, believed in the dream and right then were willing to pay any cost to see it come true.

None of them had any way of knowing just how high the price of this dream would ultimately be.

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CHAPTER 11

Frank stood in the doorway, startled into immobility. Tommy was sitting with his back to him, pulling a duty he could still do, monitoring the radio news broadcasts for information of interest. He couldn't write it down, but he had a small voice-activated recorder on the desk. That was normal. No, the thing that startled his commander was that he could see the biker's reflection in a nearby computer monitor, and Tommy was actually smiling just a little.

He caught Frank's reflection in the same monitor and waved a flopping hand.

"Come on in."

Frank came, but noted the smile had vanished, and the joy of that short-lived expression didn't make it all the way to his friend's tone.

"How's it going? Is the move going on schedule?"

The "move" was a regular thing; Frank knew better than to stay in any one location, no matter how comfortable or "safe" it was, for very long. The headquarters company, along with the auxiliaries and their Irregular security team, left too big of a footprint on the local landscape to remain unnoticed by the locals indefinitely, and what people noticed, they talked about, especially since there was little else to do these days. Eventually, word would reach the wrong ears, and a raid would follow; either that, or a thousand pound bunker-buster bomb dropped from on high, as had happened with the Arkansas Theater Command three months ago. That state's newest leader was their highest-ranking surviving officer, a major, who had had the good fortune to be elsewhere at the time. Frank had no intention of allowing that to happen to his CAP Headquarters, so at irregular intervals – a couple of days, a week, or a month at the outside – they went through the logistical puzzle of moving once more. Of course, that was dangerous too; just not as dangerous as staying put.

"Fine," Frank told him, "Just reminding you to make sure you're ready; you're moving out with the next to the last group in about an hour."

The corners of Tommy's mouth turned down a little farther. Before his injuries, he would have been moving out with the last bunch as rear guard, in command of part of it and able to carry a rifle.

Shit! I didn't intend to end up like this!

Suddenly he was aware that his friend and commander was speaking again.

"By the way, there's something else you might be interested in, as it concerns you and Donna."

"Okay…"

Frank grinned. "Well, I've got good news and bad news. The good news is that, if everything goes according to plan, you two will be on your way to Russia within a couple of weeks. They'll have the best neurosurgical team in Moscow ready and waiting for you."

Tommy sat bolt-upright so quickly, he nearly fell out of his chair.

"You mean…you've got it all arranged?"

"No, I mean Vika's got it all arranged; she's the one you need to thank."

"I will! You'd better believe it! Is she going with us?"

"No," Frank said, shaking his head, "she'll be staying here, but you two are big kids; you can handle it."

There was excitement in his voice as he exclaimed, "Yeah, but…wow! Man, I hate to get my hopes up, but…well, wow!"

"You'd better get them up, and damned well keep them up. You know as well as I do you're attitude has as much to do with healing as anything the doctors can do."

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"I know, and I'll try…wait a minute! What's the bad news?"

"Well, first a little bit more good news. Mike's going to be riding part of the way with you; he's going to be dropped off at Lucky Charlie's new headquarters for awhile, and eventually, over the next month or so, we'll all be moving down to that general vicinity. We've got a lot of support there, and it's one of the counties we're solidifying our hold on."

"That's great! I'd love to have Mike see me off, but what's the bad news?"

"It's not really that bad; you all will be riding with Field Marshal Edge."

Frank waited patiently and even smiled at the outburst he'd known was coming; not so much at the imaginative profanity as at the spirit that it showed wasn't quite dead yet. This was the old Tommy, the one he knew and had missed for so long.

Finally, he finished with, "Why the hell would Edge want to take me anywhere? He hates my guts!"

"For the same reason you'd do something you didn't like if Donna asked you to, or I'd do it if Sammie asked." Frank held up his left little finger and used the pinched index finger and thumb of his right hand to make wrapping motions around it. "Vika asked, so he's doing it." He paused, laughing and shaking his head. "We're all in the same boat; they've got us all right where we want them."

Tommy snickered, a single chortle, but it put a hard lump in Frank's throat. It was the first laugh his friend had produced since his capture months ago, and he wouldn't have traded anything for the privilege of hearing it.

"Still," he finally said, after thinking about it for a bit, "I have trouble picturing Edge coming down here just for that."

"Don't get the big head; he doesn't like you *that* much. No, he's planning on us hosting some kind of propaganda event that involves both our people and North Carolina."

"North Carolina? What the hell is he up to?"

Frank shrugged, spreading his hands.

"Who knows? Whatever it is, it must be something important. It must be some kind of photo-op, because we're supposed to begin digging up all the uniforms we can find."

Phone conversation

"*We missed a golden opportunity with that trial. The damned rebels turned that into a media circus, and now half the world thinks their shit doesn't stink!"*

"*That wasn't my fault! No one from my state was invited, and I had no way of even knowing when and where it was."*

"*We're paying you well, and I expect better. Remember, your ass is literally on the line."*

"*Do you think I don't know that?"*

"*Then act like it!"*

"*I am! Listen, I may have some new information for you; rumor has it that Edge and both the Gores are going to be together in one place very soon."*

"*Where?"*

"*I haven't got the final details yet, but if you can get me the surveillance equipment I need, I've got a plan that should lead you right to them, as well as to a bunch of CAP safe houses in both the Carolinas."*

"*I'm listening. Tell me what you want."*

"*It's like this; I hear Edge is planning a big ceremony soon, another media event…"*

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DAY 767

CHAPTER 12

Another day, another barn...

Actually, their latest temporary headquarters didn't look much like a barn anymore, at least on its inner northeast corner, because Field Marshal Jonathon Edge knew the importance of theater and perception in the eyes of the people, and he had determined to do this right. Accordingly, several guerrillas with carpentry skills had quickly transformed one section of a beef cattle barn into a smart conference room. After throwing up some stud walls, they tacked paneling over them, glued hardwood tiles to the sheets of plywood laid down for the floor, and used more glue to attach the ceiling tiles to still more plywood screwed to temporary beams overhead. Pictures of President Jefferson Davis and General Robert E. Lee graced one wall, on either side of a political map that showed a divided United States, with the northern states depicted in blue and the southern in gray. A 3rd National Confederate Flag stood in one corner and a square Battle Flag in the other. The only furniture was a podium, however, because this was neither the time nor place for anyone to be sitting. Indeed, the only one who was doing so was Mike Dayton, confined to his wheelchair. Everyone else, from the twenty Irregulars in the back to the officers and guests of honor in a single row in front faced the podium, hands at their sides at attention, and everyone was in field gray fatigues, complete with rank insignia. Since there were much more important things in the day-to-day logistics of running a guerrilla war, there were few uniforms to go around, so many of them were pieced together from borrowed pieces or hastily stitched up by some of the lady auxiliaries who possessed such skills. Still, the effect was perfect. Even though the place still smelled like cow manure and the whole thing would be disassembled and gone two hours after they had finished the half-hour ceremony, no one simply seeing the pictures would ever think it was anything but what it looked like; a very nice conference room. As a bonus, Edge knew it would drive the Federal Forces crazy trying to figure out where it was, and would cost them in money, resources, and manpower, analyzing every second of video and audio in the attempt.

From his position behind the wooden podium, Edge looked over the men and women standing before him. He knew most of them personally, of course, but he had never had all of them in the same room at the same time. He wouldn't have them bunched up in one location at the moment, if not for the propaganda value of this awards ceremony. He had two video cameras on them right now, in fact – one being run by Corporal Cynthia Dover, and the other by Captain Joel Harrison, just to make sure they got good footage. Three other men, two Irregulars and one of the Virginian bodyguards who had come with Edge, were steadily snapping digital stills.

"Major Hodges, Lieutenant Graham, Lieutenant Long, Lieutenant Biscoe; step forward." Even as he gave the order, Edge stepped around the podium, and his fiancée Victoria stepped proudly to his side, standing at attention and holding a polished wooden case. Despite being Russian, she had thrown her lot in with the man she loved and with his cause, and dressed in a Confederate uniform like the rest, although, being built much like Samantha, she filled it out more attractively than most.

The four men – the first three South Carolina born, the final one from North Carolina – stepped forward from the front row as one, their left boots rising and setting down at the same time, and their right one taking its place beside them as they resumed attention.

Not so long ago, all of them had been enlisted men in the guerrilla forces of the Confederate Army Provisional, with Hodges holding the highest rank, that of sergeant. Frank promoted the three from his state himself, while Colonel Suggs had pinned the Lieutenant's bars on his subordinate, Biscoe, all for the same action.

"The four of you acted above and beyond the call of duty in the rescue of General Gore, risking your own lives in a successful effort to save his, and, despite your own wounds, pushing your bodies and spirits to the limit and beyond in the process of affecting that rescue. You have demonstrated the courage and honor that

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should be an example to all. Therefore, you are each hereby awarded the Silver Star of Valor."

Walking down the line, followed by Victoria, he reached in the box she held and pinned the award on each man's breast before coming to attention and saluting. The men returned the gesture, then, at his order, stepped back in line.

"Lieutenant Grissom; step forward."

Dee Grissom, another North Carolinian, had deserted to the Confederates from the United States Army, and had given his new cause yeoman's service since.

"Lieutenant Grissom, in turning your back on the forces of tyranny and joining with the forces of liberty, for going above and beyond the call of duty in single-handedly battling four enemy soldiers in order to save the life of our wounded comrade, Lieutenant Drucci, and for exemplary service in battle to rescue Confederate prisoners, you are hereby awarded the Silver Star of Valor."

After he was similarly decorated and he had stepped back, Edge called out again.

"General Gore and Colonel Suggs; step forward."

The two obeyed, although both were surprised at being the recipients of anything.

"For going above and beyond the call of duty, and showing exemplary courage and ability by rallying your troops, and by setting the example by taking on an enemy helicopter gunship with nothing more than your side arms, you are hereby awarded the Silver Star of Valor."

The process was repeated, and each man returned to his place.

"Lieutenant Drucci; step forward."

Despite a series of stubborn infections, Danny Drucci, an unlikely Yankee transplant from no less than New York City, had finally healed from his wounds, and had retaken his place with the Irregulars. This time he had done so with a promotion to officer status, just as Frank had promoted all of the surviving Irregulars…all four of them.

"Lieutenant Drucci; you intentionally laid down your life alongside the rest of your fallen comrades in the 1st Columbia Irregulars in order to save the life of General Gore, and again when you fought a delaying action in order to give the rest of your comrades a chance to escape. That God, in His infinite wisdom, chose to let you survive has no bearing on the courage you have shown. There is only one award suitable for that. By unanimous decision of the Confederate Council, you are hereby presented the Medal of Honor, the highest honor it is within the power of the Confederate States of America to give."

Danny was in a state of shock when the Field Marshal draped the tri-color ribbon around his neck so the Maltese cross and laurel leaves hung centered on his chest.

"Sir," he stammered, the survivor's guilt still gnawing at his very soul, "I don't – "

Edge grinned tightly. "Yes you do, son." He saluted and Danny followed suit, before following the order to step back.

"Colonel Dayton, Major Richardson, and Lieutenant Waddell; step forward."

Edge cringed inwardly when he realized what he had said; Mike Dayton wouldn't be stepping anywhere, since he was a paraplegic confined to a wheelchair. He was relieved when no one seemed to notice however, and then the three were before him, two standing and one seated. The Field Marshal was not an emotional man or one overly given to empathy, particularly towards someone like Tommy who had pointed a gun at him more than once, but looking at the changes in the trio he had known for some time hurt him inside.

Tommy Richardson's hands were splinted and bound with flesh-colored elastic bandages, in order to keep them from flopping. He still walked with a slight but noticeable limp as well, from his leg that had been compound fractured by a club. Never a big man to start with, he remained emaciated from the pneumonia that had nearly killed him, and now looked wasted and small. His eyes were the worst, however; it seemed as if most of the life and gone right out of them. Searching, he saw a faint spark of hope still flickering, but very faint. Still, it was something.

Donna, standing next to her fiancé, had recovered physically, but her mental and spiritual recovery was another matter. Once notoriously outgoing, even a little wild, she now looked out at the world like a dog who had been kicked too often, seeing everything through a curtain of sadness and fear, after what had been done to them both. Edge had always liked her, admiring her feistiness, and seeing her in that shape hurt.

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The wheelchair-bound paraplegic, Mike Dayton, had undergone perhaps the biggest change of all. Since the love of his life had died during his rescue, he had become as cold and hard as Edge himself, and maybe more so because of the rage that burned inside him. Looking into those once-warm brown eyes turned, on the surface, as flat and dead and merciless as the business end of a red oak club, the Field Marshal had the strange and unnerving impression of a volcano of anger boiling molten inside, confined within an all-too-fragile dam of ice.

Still, considering what they'd been through, he couldn't blame them.

"The three of you held fast in the face of savage torture, the grossest possible mistreatment – " He knew that was putting it mildly, but he'd be damned if he'd give the details. " – and yet you still refused to divulge information to the enemy. Your courage, tenacity, and strength is nearly beyond comprehension. You have literally earned this award with your blood. By the unanimous decision of the Confederate Council, you are each hereby presented with Medal of Honor, the highest award it is within the power of the Confederate States of America to give."

Donna managed a slight smile and a little color in her cheeks, but Tommy and Mike showed no reaction at all. Either of them would have been far happier to have been given a bullet and an enemy skull to shoot it into.

Once they had returned to their places, Edge called out, "Colonel Gore, step forward."

If Frank and Watis had been startled, Samantha was in total shock, but, nevertheless, she obeyed.

"Colonel Gore, you have earned this award twice over. For your actions in refusing to divulge information to the enemy despite intensive torture in Columbia, and for the courage exhibited in rallying the troops by launching a single-handed charge against a fortified enemy position only days before you were to give birth..." He paused, shaking his head, barely able to believe it himself, "You are hereby presented with Medal of Honor, the highest award it is in the power of the Confederate States of America to give."

Samantha felt both elation and shame; elation that she had been recognized, but shame in that it seemed as if she hadn't done nearly enough to merit something like this.

"I don't deserve this!" she whispered as Edge leaned close to put the ribbon around her neck.

"Yes you do," he whispered back. "I was only one of the people who nominated you for this. The Council also received a petition signed by every last surviving member of that raid you led, telling me what I already knew; that you deserve this decoration."

He stepped back, saluted, and she numbly returned it before stepping back into ranks, where she caught her husband's brief wink and proud smile.

That he's proud of me means a whole lot more than this medal!

Then it was over, and someone produced a tray of glasses full of clear liquid – North Carolina moonshine that Colonel Suggs had brought with him – and each of them took one, except for Donna, who took two, since Tommy couldn't hold his. Tenderly, she placed it in his elastic-wrapped hand and closed her own around it in order to hold it there. Once they were ready, the Field Marshal raised his glass.

"To the Confederacy!"

"To the Confederacy!" they returned like a rumble of thunder, and each one slugged down their glass – Tommy with Donna's help – at a single gulp, and the homemade liquor burned in their throats like liquid fire, but filled their veins with warmth.

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CHAPTER 13

"Are you ready?"

Mike Dayton, already changed back into civilian clothes, looked up from his wheelchair and nodded.

"Yeah, ready as I'll ever be."

Cynthia grinned slightly. "You look ready."

She was referring to the pair of high-capacity 9mm Glocks that he carried in shoulder holsters on either side, with spare magazines hanging beneath them, and the small duffel bag sitting his lap that he had yet to zip. The open seam revealed the boxy action of a MAC 10 submachine gun and half a dozen grenades. Seeing her looking, he pulled the zipper closed.

"I'm not going to be taken again," he said as flatly and calmly as if he were talking about the weather.

Cynthia bit her lip even as she dipped her chin slightly in acknowledgment.

"I know. Just…be careful, Mike. Please."

"I will," he promised, still looking at her, his expression unreadable. "I guess I'd better go and get in the car. I reckon I'll see you in about a month."

"Yeah, I guess so." *If you live, if I live, oh God!* "Would you like me to walk out with you?"

"Yeah, you know I'd like that. Thanks."

"You're welcome. Do you need anything else?"

Mike nodded ever so slowly, and Cynthia blushed and smiled before leaning over, slipping her arms around him, and pressing her lips to his. They held each other for awhile, because that was going to have to do them both for a long time.

"Ahhhh..." Dee Grissom sighed, long and drawn out as he urinated against a bush just off a North Carolina back road a little over an hour later, "That's how I spell relief; I write it in the snow in big yellow letters."

Johnny Biscoe, relieving himself in a similar manner a few feet away, grinned without looking at him.

"I think you're still all shook up over your medal; there ain't no snow out here."

Dee glared good-naturedly at dry-humored man.

"Why the hell do you always have to take things so literally?"

Unperturbed, Johnny made a *tsk* sound and shook his head, as if the answer were obvious to anyone short of a total moron.

"Well now, Dee, I always figured you for an honest man, so I reckon you ought to say it like you mean it."

As he zipped his own pants, Watis ignored the good-natured bantering between the two men. Both were a couple of his best, totally dependable, and they just seemed to mesh with each other for some reason. They had become friends in the short time they had known each other, and they showed it by constantly ragging on one another.

Of course, their Colonel couldn't fault them for being in a good mood either, because he was pretty damned happy himself, all in all. Besides the recognition of the medals and the sting they took out of North Carolina being snubbed during the trial, he had gotten in at least a brief visit with Frank and Samantha, both of whom he admired and liked. Even the Field Marshal didn't seem to be as much of a tight-ass as he used to be. Of course, after meeting his pretty Russian fiancée, he could see why. Watis had three ex-wives of his own, and he knew what a relaxing effect it had on a man to get his pipes cleaned out once in a while.

His grin grew broader, shining through his thick beard. Their little army tended to gossip more than an old ladies' quilting society, and he had heard talk of Frank and Samantha spending every spare second they could beg, borrow or steal alone behind closed doors.

Hell, as pretty as she is, I would too; in fact, I reckon I'd be the most relaxed son of a bitch in Dixie!

With that pleasant thought bouncing around in his mind, he turned and walked back to the car, looking down and shaking his bald head with a smile, and an empty beer bottle saved the Confederacy.

The bottle, a brown longneck with its label weathered off, was lying next to the car; they hadn't noticed it when they pulled in, and had nearly hit it with the front wheel. Now its curvature reflected the underside of the

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vehicle, including the flickering red glow of a blinking LED light.

His first thought was that it might be a bomb, but he wanted to be sure.

"Get over here, boys!" he called out, "We've got a problem!"

Both of them were zipping up anyway, and came rushing to join him, pistols already in their hands. He pointed at the bottle.

"Take a look at that reflection, and tell me what you see."

They stared in consternation for a moment, then Dee Grissom got down on the ground and gingerly stuck his head beneath the car. After studying for a minute, his hands followed, detaching magnet holding the electronic object. As he scooted back out with the little black box in his hands, they saw his face had gone milk-white.

"It's not a bomb," he said as he got to his feet, his voice strangely flat, "It's a GPS beacon. Whoever planted it knows exactly where we are, as well as where we've been!"

Watis, Biscoe and Grissom all looked with horror at the object, realizing that they were not only in immediate danger themselves, but that they had inadvertently betrayed the location of South Carolina's headquarters, including the location of Frank Gore and Jonathon Edge.

Watis swore with great feeling.

"Son of a bitch!"

"What do we do with it? Bust it?" Johnny asked, and Dee shook his head.

"We do that and the signal dies, and they'll know we've found it."

The Colonel nodded. "Good point. My guess is that they won't do anything until we get back to North Carolina for fear of showing their hand, and then they'll hit us there and every place we've been, all at once. I know that's what I'd do." He blew out his breath at the thought of the danger they were in, particularly if he was wrong. "We're going to have to hang onto this for awhile and take them on a wild goose chase. What do you say we go to Charlotte? You all up for it?"

Both of them indicated their agreement, their lips tight-set.

"Then get the lead out of your asses and let's go! Time's a-wasting!"

Even as they jumped into the car, Watis was already shouting into his cell phone.

"Give me Frank! Now, damn it, now!"

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CHAPTER 14

"We're going to miss you, Tommy."

Tommy Richardson glanced toward the car where Edge and his driver were sitting and waiting behind the pair of blocking cars, and Mike, who was already heaving himself in with his powerful arms getting in while Cynthia steadied his chair. The biker nodded to Frank, and the ex-cop was overjoyed to see the growing glow of hope in his friend's eyes. "I'll miss you all too. I...just thanks, man."

"You know you're welcome. You want to thank me, do what the doctors tell you and get better. I need you here!" Glancing at the huge Billy Sprouse, standing beside him, he added, "Somebody's got to tuck this big ox in at night."

All of them laughed at that, but it was forced. No one, including the Russian neurosurgeons waiting halfway around the world, knew for sure if Tommy would ever regain the full use of his hands, but it was the only chance he had.

Coming forward, Victoria laid her hand on Donna's shoulder, and the younger girl turned to look at her, sadness and pain for both her man and herself warring in her eyes against a tiny spark of hope.

"You've got the Russian language CDs and cultural book I gave you, yes?"

Donna nodded. "Yeah, right here in my bag. Vika, I don't know how to begin to thank you for all this..."

Victoria interrupted by the expedient of gently laying her fingertips across the girl's lips. She said, "If you want to thank me, you stand beside Tommy, come what may. Will you do that?"

"Yes, I'll do that. I can definitely promise that!"

"Good. Now, my family's phone number and address are in there too; you can both stay with them while he's recovering." Looking down at Donna's slender body, she added, "A few months of good Russian food will put some meat on those skinny little bones of yours. Just be careful; my mother will stuff you like a pillow if you let her!"

There were tears of gratitude in Donna's green eyes as she nodded, not trusting herself to speak, and then hugged the older woman.

"I'll never forget what you've done for us," she whispered, "especially for Tommy!"

Victoria's own eyes began tearing up; not only did she have a niece of her own about Donna's age, but she understood the depths of love, because she was in love herself.

"Donna, honey," Sam said, approaching the two as they disengaged, "it's about that time." He affectionately laid one hand on her shoulder and raised the gently admonishing finger of the other to just in front of her nose. "Now you be on your best behavior while you're over there, and you be careful, you hear?"

"I hear, Uncle Sam," she told him with a tight smile. "I'm not a little girl anymore, you know."

"You are to me," he told her, and she threw herself into his arms and held him tightly.

"I know, and that's why I love you so much!"

Victoria watched, feeling very much the outsider despite how well she was treated. Part of the problem was the man holding the girl right now.

The others, although complex personalities, weren't really too hard to figure out. *Sam, though*…Sam remained an enigma to her. She really didn't know if he liked her or not; she couldn't tell, which, considering the man, made it a definite mystery. Sam Wirtz was a paradox. While he was notoriously devious in business and war, socially he was an open, often blunt man. When he cared for someone, he made it obvious; there was nothing he wouldn't do for them. On the other hand, if he didn't like someone, that was equally obvious, and occasionally fatally so. She was the lone exception; he was polite to her, of course, and courteous to a fault, but those actions had a sort of deliberate correctness, a careful distancing, an ever-so-slightly stiff formality that she'd seen him show with no one else, friend or foe.

He's older, close to Jonathon's age. Even more than me, he's a child of the Cold War; maybe it's because I'm Russian...

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She instantly pushed that idea aside as faulty; Sam had become good friends with a couple of the older Spetznaz advisors, to the point where they drank and joked and played poker together whenever they were around.

Victoria frowned; *Could it be a man-thing, some kind of male-bonding issue, like maybe he's actually jealous of me for coming between him and Jonathon?*

That was another flawed idea, she decided. Sam was Jonathon Edge's oldest living friend, but both of them had grown even closer to Frank Gore than they'd ever been to each other.

The really irritating thing was that she had grown to like the man very much despite herself; not only because he was her fiancé's friend, but because, while he had as much courage as any of the Rebels, he also had a rare tenderness and humanity, especially toward young women. It wasn't lustful, but simply caring, and he could actually be a pest with it...to everyone except her.

Maybe I'm the one who's jealous...or worse, maybe I'm old enough that he thinks I don't need it.

That last thought depressed the hell out of her, but she was snapped out of her funk by both Frank and Samantha calling for her.

"Vika! Come over here for a minute!"

Her smile returned as she obeyed their voices and waving hands; she knew where she stood with these two, at least, especially Sammie, impatiently motioning to her with one hand while she held Linda propped on the opposite hip with the other. Frank genuinely liked her and she reciprocated – even though he got this hard look in his eye on occasion that scared the hell out of her – but Samantha was truly her friend, one of the best she'd ever had in her life. Of course, Samantha sometimes exhibited that same frightening look, but perhaps where both she and Victoria were women, she understood it a little better and was less frightened by it. After what the couple had been through, it would be foolish to think that they wouldn't have what the Americans liked to euphemistically to call "issues."

Tommy stood looking expectantly at her now as Samantha, tired of her hanging back, hooked her free arm through Victoria's and brought her forward by main force to stand in front of the former biker.

The combination of his beard and the partial plate that replaced most of his front teeth hid some of the worst of his physical scars, but he still looked like a boxer who had lost far more than he won. Actually, he looked a lot like Frank now, only in Tommy's case, the damage was worse.

"I didn't want to leave without thanking you," he told her, the sincerity evident in his voice. "However the operation eventually comes out, I owe you for this; I owe you big-time!"

"You don't owe me anything!" she protested. "If you do, you can pay me back by getting better." Suddenly, she smiled mischievously. "There *is* one thing you can do for me while you're there."

"Name it."

"Tell my mother and my father I'm fine, I miss them, and that I love them."

His face abruptly split in the kind wide, open smile they had seldom seen since his captivity.

"I'll do that."

She hugged him, but she wasn't the last by any means. Samantha, Frank, Billy, and Sam all took a turn doing the same thing, all of them calling him "brother" and every one of them meaning it. Finally, there was nothing left to say; Donna took his arm, they got in the car that was waiting for them, and a moment later, they were gone.

Victoria noticed that all of them turned away before the car completely disappeared; none was willing to risk bucking the superstition that it was bad luck to watch until the traveler went completely out of sight, because he might not come back. She didn't think they really believed it, but they had been on the sharp end for so long that they weren't willing to take the chance. She almost laughed at herself, because she followed suit, not willing to test the superstition either. Glancing at Sam, she saw he had pulled his hat off and had it dangling from his fist, his head bowed while his lips moved in silent prayer for the travelers.

He is the mystery man.

Victoria frowned slightly once more. She had been trained as a Russian intelligence officer, and mysteries were one thing she simply couldn't stand; it just wasn't in her nature. She determined to get to the bottom of this one before she was through...assuming they both lived long enough.

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She idly noticed the ring tone of a cell phone, but only realized it was Frank's when she saw him fish it out of his belt holster and put it to his ear. Abruptly she had a flash of intuition that clamped down on her spine right between her shoulder blades with cold iron claws.

Something's gone wrong!

Frank simply said, "Thanks," and mashed the button to turn off his cell phone, but something in his tone made Samantha look up in time to blanch at the expression on his face.

"We've been compromised!" he shouted, his voice ringing across their compound, "We bug out now!"

Their headquarters exploded in a flurry of swearing and activity, with everybody rushing around yelling and grabbing what they could.

"Cynthia; call Edge and tell them what's happened, and that I recommend he change vehicles; their image may have been picked up by satellite! Sam; notify the outlying units! Sammie, put our computers in my pack and grab a bag for Linda!" They kept one packed with diapers, baby food and a non-noise-making toy, just in case of just this sort of emergency. Frank was still shouting while boots pounded the ground and everyone scrambled to obey. "Remember the plan, people! Laptops, weapons and ammo only! If it doesn't go 'bang' or hold data, leave it here! One canteen and no more food and gear than you can stuff in your pockets! No body armor or anything else heavy; we've got to travel fast! And tell Casey to set the charges! Come on, move it! We leave in five minutes!"

Once the other officers and non-coms took up the cry and he was sure everyone was in gear, he picked up the phone and quickly punched in a number.

"*Hello?"*

"Charlie? Frank. We've got a family emergency; we're leaving now, and we need some directions."

Nearly a hundred miles away, Colonel "Lucky Charlie" Carnes, the recently-promoted commander of South Carolina's forces, sat bolt upright in his seat. The one-eyed, one-balled triple amputee was a professional soldier, and knew better than to waste time on small talk or idle questions during an emergency.

"I've got friends at 2314 Larkin Street."

Frank glanced at the South Carolina map he habitually carried in his pocket and already had open. Only two maps like it existed; he had one and Charlie Carnes had the other. At first glance, it looked like a detailed road map, but it had its own, very nonstandard grid coordinate system, so that anyone who happened to be listening in wouldn't have a clue as to exactly where they were talking about. Tracing the grid with the index finger of each hand, he pinpointed the intersection designated 2314 Larkin Street as a rural area about twenty-two miles to the South. Since Charlie had mentioned that one first, it meant they were the closest, and he didn't have time for anything else.

"Got it."

"I'll let them know you're coming, and have them arrange a moving van for you. I'll have some friends meet you somewhere on the way. Good luck!"

There was no time to waste on small talk; they both hung up, and Frank folded the map and buttoned it into his shirt pocket before turning to Samantha.

"Ready?"

She nodded, her face pale but her lips set and determined.

"Yeah."

"All right, let's get to the vehicles."

Watis and Grissom walked up the Charlotte back street towards the parked food truck. Biscoe stayed with the car; the last thing they needed now was for someone to steal it, an event which, in a world turned to chaos and an economy turned to shit, was always a very real possibility. Even a good man can go bad when he's desperate and hungry, and a bad man will just get worse.

The food company delivered pre-ordered frozen food – primarily ice cream, but also meat and seafood – to private customers along a fixed route, and carried extra to sell to anyone along the way who might want it. With the depression and the war, the corporation needed every dollar they could come by, but despite that, the driver, a forty-two year-old Negro, wasn't any too happy to see the pair of White men coming towards him.

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They looked like hard men; in fact, they looked downright dangerous. He knew of more than one truck that had been robbed, not just for the money, but for the food.

"Hey, fellows," the driver asked somewhat uneasily as they approached the truck, giving them the broadest, friendliest smile he could put on his face, "What can I do for you?"

Grissom gave him a smile in return, making him relax a little. "We need some ice cream, man. You got any chocolate?"

"I'm fresh out of chocolate; I've got some good butter-pecan, though."

"What's the smallest container you've got?"

"We only sell it by the gallon."

"Well, I reckon we'll take a gallon then. Is it really good?"

The man nodded his wooly head enthusiastically, happy to be making a sale, but even more happy that they didn't seem intent on high jacking him or killing him. "Best damned butter pecan you'll find anywhere!"

"Good deal," Grissom said, smiling back as he pulled out his wallet. "How much do I owe you?"

The driver told him, he paid the bill, and accepted the plastic tub-like container after it was fetched from the back of the truck. Giving the man a nod, they turned and walked away. As they went, Grissom spoke out of the side of his mouth at Suggs.

"Did you do it?"

The big bearded man nodded.

"I stuck it underneath the truck when he turned to get the ice cream. Those Yankees are going to have to visit every stop he makes today; that ought to keep 'em occupied for a while, spread their forces out, and give Frank and company a better chance to get away."

Seeing his glum look, Grissom quietly asked, "You're worried about them, aren't you?"

"Frank can take care of things."

"Then what's the problem?"

"I just kind of had my mind set on chocolate."

"Yeah, me too," he answered quietly, fully understanding the necessary manly bluff that concealed their very real concern. Besides, positive thoughts tended to be a hell of a lot more comforting.

Reaching the car, they opened the doors and got in, and Biscoe looked at them pityingly and sighed. Shaking his head, he dryly observed, "I'll bet you all didn't think to get any spoons, did you?"

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CHAPTER 15

Three miles from their hastily abandoned headquarters, Casey Graham lay prone on a carpet of dead leaves and bird shit in the second story of the abandoned house. "House" might have been too grandiose a term for the decaying, unsteady structure, since it was no more than just another green lump in a thirty acre thicket of kudzu. The Irregulars' scouts had found the place early-on, carefully cataloged it, and relayed its location, along with that of every other potentially useful spot to their comrades. Casey had chosen this one for his squad's mission, primarily because it sat on a slight hummock in the gently-rolling fields, and gave the best vantage point. Reaching up, he gingerly adjusted the eye piece on the 20x60 rubber-armored Bushnell scope, taking care not to bump it from its position on its collapsible tripod.

"See anything yet?" Sergeant Albert Dixon asked, kneeling beside him and straining his own unaided eyes through the gaps in the greenery that threatened to cover the window entirely, save for the small gap Casey had made, barely big enough for the scope's 65mm lens to peer through.

"Nope," Casey said absently as he adjusted the magnification all the way down to give him the widest possible field of view, "nothing yet – hold up! Here they come!" Turning to the man on his other side, the one-eared Lieutenant showed his best maniacal grim. "Get ready, Kid, but don't even put your fingers on those damned keys until I tell you!"

"Yes sir," Private Rick Carmichael responded, not quite confident enough to muster up a grin in return as he looked once more at the cell phone in his hand, as if to make sure it was still there. The instrument was a modified model with the GPS tracking device designed to spoof, giving a location hundreds of miles away from where it actually was. In this case, however, it would be calling a number whose ring tone would be heard a long way off.

He was frightened and unbelievably excited, all at the same time. He knew a lot was riding on this, and all eyes were figuratively on him. After all, he had won the quick game of rock-scissors-paper that decided which volunteer was going to get to make the call and the teenager was definitely feeling the pressure.

Oh God, I hope I don't screw this up!

"Here they come," Casey repeated, adjusting the scope's power up slightly, "I see two Bradleys, three hummers, and…shit, they even brought a freakin' chopper! Looks like…it's a Blackhawk variant of some kind."

"Oh hell!" Sergeant Dixon muttered. He was not only an experienced guerrilla, but had also been stationed in the Middle East with the US Marines, and he knew damned good and well the scale of the threat a fully-loaded UH 60gunship represented to them personally, whatever variation it happened to be. If it spotted them, it wouldn't matter whether it was armed with a 20mm gun pod, a 30mm chain gun or just a couple of 7.62 electric Gatling guns in the doors; it would literally eat the kudzu-covered house for breakfast, and them along with it.

"You know," Dixon said in a calm, matter-of-fact voice that gave little hint of the tightness he was feeling between his shoulder blades, and the looseness he felt in his bladder, "once we blow it, that bastard is going to come looking for us, and this distance ain't nothing to him. He's probably got thermal imaging capability, and he'll be on us like stink on shit before we clear the damned kudzu."

"Don't worry; I've got a plan," Casey replied with an increasingly crazy, eager gleam in his eye before turning toward Rick. "Well Kid, how about it? Are you ready to roll the dice?"

Rick fully realized the danger, and, even though his mind was screaming at him not to do it, something else even deeper inside him was so thrilled with the idea it made him slightly giddy. He looked at Casey, bared his teeth in an expression meant to look something like a smile, and enthusiastically said, "I am if you are, sir. Hell, today's my birthday, and this ought to make one heck of a candle; let's rock and roll!" the high-pitched tone squeezed out of his guitar string-tight vocal chords somewhat spoiling the effect.

Casey laughed and slapped him on the shoulder.

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Damn, I like this kid!

"Well happy birthday and amen, boy; let's rock and roll! You go ahead and bring up the number, but just be sure you wait for my signal. When I give it, you hit it right then. Got it?"

"Yes sir!"

"Sir," the sergeant said a little more insistently, "I really recommend you don't do this."

Casey glared at him for a moment, and then sighed inwardly. Sergeant Dixon was a good man, a solid man, but he was a little too solid. The NCO was an inside-the-box thinker, as conservative in his war-fighting as he was in his politics. Casey knew that guerrilla wars like this one were not won by being conservative or limited in any way, shape or form. Often as not, they were won by being meaner, gutsier, and just buck-nuts, bat-shit crazier than the ones on the other side. Dixon didn't have that; it just wasn't in his nature. Casey, on the other hand, had an overabundance, and he didn't want to be distracted from it right now. He made a mental note to transfer the man when he got the chance, but for now, he just wanted him away from him before he pissed him off and spoiled his mood.

"Dixon, get out there at the outer edge of this damned jungle and make sure they've secured our backdoor. When we come out of here, I expect we'll be hauling ass." He followed that with another disturbing chuckle, and Dixon was happy to oblige, scrambling down the creaking, rotting stairs much faster than was probably safe.

Glancing back over his shoulder just before his head cleared the opening, the sergeant saw Carmichael's young, unlined face fixed in concentration.

Damned boy is as crazy as he is!

Casey ignored him, keeping his eye glued to the scope while the Bradleys and one of the Hummers circled the barn under the watchful eye of the hovering Blackhawk. Seeing there was no sign of life and they weren't taking any fire, one of the fighting vehicles came to a stop on either side, with the Hummers covering each end. Troops began spilling out. Half of them sheltered with their vehicles, providing cover, while the remainder began entering through the wide-open doors. The guerrilla officer nodded in professional admiration; they were doing their entries exactly right, keeping the entry team under constant cover. Obviously they had been well trained.

Good. That will make them harder to replace!

When Casey transferred the focus of his attention back on the chopper, Rick could hear him saying, "Come on-come on-come on," chanting it under his breath like a mantra until what he had been waiting for began to happen. The chopper was on a trajectory that would take it overtop of the barn.

Casey raised his hand, poised for the signal, and his voice was filled with excitement.

"Get ready…ready…wait for it…*Now!*"

He chopped his hand down sharply for emphasis and Rick instantly mashed "dial" just as the Blackhawk began passing over the building not thirty feet overhead.

Inside the barn, just beside the sliding doors on the north end, was a three-hundred gallon fuel tank. Its bottom was raised about five feet off the floor on a sturdy metal frame, typical for a gravity-feed system intended for fueling tractors and other farm vehicles, evidenced by its valve and hanging black hose with a nozzle on the end, and the words "DIESEL ONLY" stenciled in bold white letters on its side. After a quick check to see that no one was hiding behind the pile of five gallon grease and oil cans stacked beneath it on a dirty, half-rotted wooden pallet, the soldiers paid it no more attention. That was a serious mistake, because, instead of diesel, the tank was filled with a 50/50 mixture of gasoline and kerosene, and the topmost can stacked beneath it, pressed tightly against its bottom, had something else in it besides grease. It was packed full of C4 high explosive, save for the hollowed out cone that would direct the powerful charge's force straight up and into the fuel tank. A set of insulated wires ran from the detonator inside it, out through its bottom and through the cans it rested upon, and a few inches into the ground beneath. From there it made a right angle turn and ran outside, just under the surface, emerging beneath a rusty hay bailer a few yards away. The bailer contained the battery, the switch, and the cell phone. When Rick called, the connection was made.

There was an earth-shattering blast followed by a roar, and the barn, along with everything and everyone in it, was swallowed from sight in a rising, expanding fireball. The nearest Bradley and one of the Hummers,

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along with the soldiers sheltering near them, were engulfed in the fiery outer edge, and another Hummer was blown over on its side, pinning two soldiers beneath it.

The blast tilted the chopper almost ninety degrees to port, making it instantly lose altitude. It immediately dropped several feet, more than enough for the tips of its spinning rotor blades to dig into the South Carolina earth beside the barn and shatter under the impact. With not enough left to hold it up, sixty-five feet and fifteen million dollars worth of killing machine fell sideways into the blazing inferno, quickly adding its fuel, its ammo, and the flesh of its occupants to the flames.

Even as the distant rumbling echo of the explosion's roar reached them seconds after the destruction itself, Casey was slapping Rick on the shoulder, and at the same time using the younger man's body to boost himself to his feet.

"Did you see that, Kid? Oh shit, that was freaking beautiful! We came, we saw and we kicked their Yankee ass! Now come on! Let's get the hell out of here before their buddies show up!"

Rick couldn't argue with any of that, and wasn't about to. Even as he vaulted himself upright, snatching his rifle as he rose, he reflected that his company commander had been right; that was the biggest damned candle he had ever seen!

"You all right, Sammie?"

At the sound of her husband's voice, barely above a whisper, she managed a quick, nervous smile in return, even as she used her submachine gun barrel to move aside a thorny vine so it wouldn't scrape against little Linda, who hung against her in a homemade baby sling of camouflage cloth, contentedly nursing through the unbuttoned gap in her mother's matching open shirt.

"I'm fine."

He nodded his approval. "Great; just hang in there, and we'll get out of this."

As she watched him jog back to the front of their little line, the big bulldog Thumper running beside him, she believed him because she loved him, and, despite the danger of their situation, she knew, if anyone could get them out of this, it would be Frank. Like the rest of them, she would keep going until they reached safety, or until...something else happened.

She thanked God that they had been able to take the packed vehicles – cars, trucks, livestock trailers – part of the distance along a series of back roads before abandoning them while still in motion, leaving them for the auxiliaries to hide, and shaving about ten miles off what would have otherwise have been a borderline-impossible journey. Even as it was, they were covering ground at an incredible rate that taxed every ounce of energy they could put out, but, as her husband had told them, "This is a Jackson march. If old Stonewall could cover distances this fast, so can we! We've got to push on and keep pushing!"

Glancing around for what must have been the thousandth time, she saw through the fading light of early evening that everyone was where they should be. Cynthia was directly in front of her, separated by about twenty feet. The younger girl's intense eyes shifted constantly back and forth, looking for danger. Cynthia had proven herself as ferocious and capable as some of the men more than once, so Samantha knew she didn't have to worry about her, although she supposed she always would.

Their weakest link was in line directly behind her; Frank had set a brutal pace, alternately running and fast walking, and they had already covered nearly over nine miles over rough wooded terrain since they left the trucks barely not even three hours ago, and it was all Carla Dover could do to keep up. With the exceptions of Victoria, who was behind her at the same distance, and Sam, twice that far to the rear walking drag, Cynthia's mother knew she was the oldest, and her fitness level was the lowest. Short like her daughter and having a tendency to be slightly chubby by nature, no one would call Carla that now; the nurse had been working hard to build herself up and she had come a long way, but she hadn't been at it as long as the rest. Still, Samantha knew the woman's inner strength, and had no doubt she would push herself until she literally dropped, if necessary.

I just hope to God that won't be necessary.

Samantha shifted her gaze to Victoria and, sensing she was being observed, Edge's Fiancée shifted the AKM she was carrying and raised her tired eyes.

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"You okay?" Samantha mouthed silently, and she nodded, her face flushing with exertion but determined.

Victoria released the foregrip of her assault rifle to give her a tight smile and a thumbs-up. Like Samantha and Cynthia, she was in remarkably good physical shape, but like all of them, this forced march was beginning to tell on her.

Samantha could barely make out Sam through the brush, well behind and walking drag, but she could tell he was still there, which was more than she could say for their flankers, Jim Reynolds and Billy. The two men were somewhere fifty yards out on the left and right respectively, and were no more than an occasional glimpse of movement through the leaves.

They had been moving through the thick, second- and third-growth forests of South Carolina for what seemed like forever, and, despite their combat loads, the rugged terrain and occasional creek that left them all wet to the waist, they had left any enemy pursuit far behind. Of course, with the knowledge that the enemy was still somewhere behind them, even by a few miles, they certainly had the motivation.

Looking at his lovely blond wife and daughter, Frank swallowed hard; his primary motivation was right there with him.

Lord God, that was close!

From the call Casey Graham had made once his part of the mission was complete, they had only gotten clear of the farm fifteen minutes before the enemy troops would have arrived, and their bug-out had been an object lesson in rapidity. All they carried besides their weapons, ammo, the clothes on their backs and bits of food in their pockets were their laptop and notebook computers containing critical information; everything else was smoldering in the ruins of their headquarters behind them, blown up and burned to keep it out of Federal hands. Each one had their basic kit of a canteen of water, a pocket full of energy bars, a handful of emergency amphetamine speedballs, and the determination to get away. And the good men of the 1st South Carolina Irregulars, without whom they would never have stood a chance.

There had been four of the original Irregulars left after the slaughter in the mountains of North Carolina six months ago. Frank had responded by rolling Joel Harrison's six man 'Dojo Squad' into the unit, putting Harrison second in command under the highest-ranking survivor, Major Ronald Hodges, and then pulling the very best of their auxiliaries and the other Palmetto militias into it. Now it was stronger than ever, a full two hundred men. At the moment, most of them were spread out over a square mile area, moving primarily in front and to either side of Frank's group, but not bunching up so as not to draw undue attention. Thirty of them, in addition to Casey Graham's squad, were behind, fighting a hit and run delaying action with sniping attacks and "weedfield mines."

The mines got their name from the illicit marijuana farmers who used them to protect their patches. They consisted of a short pipe nipple with one end open and with a screw through the cap at the opposite end. It would just fit a shotgun shell, allowing the primer to sit on the point of the screw while a half-inch of the cartridge's business end protruded. It was a simple matter to use a "dibble" – a pointed stick the diameter of the containing pipe – to punch a hole in the ground and ease the mine into it, just like planting a flower bulb. The whole procedure took less than thirty seconds, but the damage it did to a foot set on it, pressing the primer against the screw and discharging the shell, would last a lifetime. More importantly, it would bring everyone nearby to a halt, lessen their numbers by causing one or two to have to take care of the casualty, and make the rest move much more slowly and carefully. Of course, the snipers did much the same thing, and, unlike the mines, they could pick their targets, and their results were more often fatal.

Any causal observer would have paid no mind to the lumps high in the branches of the moss-hung live oak. If they had seen them at all, they would have assumed they were simply more big knots, or the nests of squirrels or birds, certainly not Confederate guerrillas concealed in their sweltering ghillie suits. Lieutenant Steiner and his spotter were counting on that as they watched the oncoming platoon of Marines from their high vantage point.

Not smart, boys, crossing an open cotton field like that. They must have a dumbass for an officer.

The Marines were well spread out, moving along the rows of the knee-high plants in his direction, nearly nine-hundred yards out. Their spacing would keep any single mine or mortar round from causing more than

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one or two casualties at most, but it also made it easier for Steiner to choose his targets.

"Sniper's third from the left," Corporal Andy Baker told him, looking through the powerful spotting scope, and his officer nodded his approval. The official procedure in the sniper protocol of any military was to take out the enemy officer first, but Steiner had more sense than that. First, killing the officer would simply leave the sergeant in charge, who was generally, at least in his experience, better qualified to lead in the first place. More importantly, it would leave the only soldier who could be a real threat to him – his opposite number with the scoped rifle – alive with time and ability to take him under fire. Steiner wasn't there to fight a sniper duel; he was there to kill. His job was there to hit and run: do as much damage as he could in order to stop or at least slow down pursuit, and then get the hell out.

"Radioman's fourteenth from the left, and there's a captain beside him, on the right."

"Marked; I'll take the officer second; then we bug out."

Steiner had prioritized, and he had also strategized; he would kill the sniper, wound the officer to ground the unit in place, and let the radio man live. The sniper had to go, but the unit could leave a dead man behind, not so a wounded one, screaming at the top of his lungs and writhing in agony from a crippling wound. He wanted them to get the word out that they had casualties, in order to tie up even more resources and further erode morale, both in the targeted squad and any others who might be listening to the radio chatter. Also, there was the matter of personal superstition; Steiner never fired three shots at one sitting. His grandfather, a veteran of World War II Europe, once told him a lesson he had learned from his own father, who had fought there in World War I: to beware of three on a match, or three of anything, really. Be it a flickering light or a gunshot, the first got their attention, the second showed them the general direction, and the third gave them something to aim at. He didn't know if it was true or not, but it made enough sense that he saw no point in testing the old wisdom if he didn't absolutely have to.

"Ready?"

He caught a brief flash of white teeth through the grease paint and hanging rags of his spotter's Ghillie suit.

"Let's light 'em up!"

Settling himself, Steiner moved his crosshairs onto the enemy sniper, took three slow, deliberate breaths, releasing the final one only halfway, and his index finger caressed his trigger of his Barrett.

The Barrett was his latest "toy." It wasn't the older .50 caliber BMG version, but the .416, the same basic cartridge but shortened and necked down to fire a smaller, solid brass projectile more accurately than its larger predecessor. While the older cartridge was originally geared toward taking out equipment, the .416 was designed for a single purpose: as a man killer. The high velocity flat-shooting round was said to be fully capable of doing that job with a single shot at twenty-five hundred yards or more. Steiner knew that was true, because he had done it several times.

At nine hundred yards, the US-issue body armor's ceramic plate inserts would have stopped a standard 5.56mm round, and probably stopped a 7.65, but it barely showed down the .416. The hard brass bullet exploded through both the front and back of the sniper's armor at the center of his torso. The shock of the impact on the armor being transferred to him and deciding the direction of his fall, he slammed flat on his back, everything in his chest cavity blown to mush and his precision rifle flying from hands that could no longer hold it.

By that time, Steiner had swung his barrel to the officer who was already on his way down in an attempt to find cover. The Barrett bucked once more, and the bullet was off just a bit; instead of hitting his thigh and blowing his leg off, the supersonic 400 grain slug blasted sideways through both of his buttocks, throwing out a massive hydrostatic shockwave that converted the blood itself into shrapnel, and blew the flesh away in huge, ragged chunks, one of which slapped another Marine several feet away in the face. The conditions were just right, so even at the distance, they could hear the distant echo of his screams, and someone shouting, "They shot his ass off! They shot his ass off!" over and over again, as if he couldn't think of anything else to say.

Good enough; he won't be going anywhere for a while.

By the time he finished that thought, he was already scrambling down the trunk, using the rope they had left for that purpose, and Corporal Baker was right behind him. Reaching the base of the tree, the spotter left the

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rope hanging, stooped for a moment, and then left on the run. They would go another mile or two, then do it all again, at least until they got word from their superiors; after that, they would make their own escape.

A pair of AH64D Apache Longbow gunships arrived eight minutes later and strafed the hell out of the woods in the general area where the shot had come from, providing cover for the HH60L, a Blackhawk variant med-evac helicopter that landed in the cotton field long enough to gather up the very dead sniper and his barely alive and very much hurting captain.

While the evac left and the Longbows stayed on station, hovering like dragonflies and providing cover, the Marines began moving forward, slowly, expecting a shot at any time, and it took them nearly an hour to cover less than a thousand yards, only to find the sniper team long gone.

The departed captain's XO, Lieutenant Peterson, swore when he saw the two spent rounds of .416 brass that had fallen to the loam and the rope, still dangling against the trunk's rough bark

"Sons of bitches were in this tree," he grumbled, stepping forward and stretching out a hand, as if to confirm its presence by feel as well as by sight. Seeing the motion, the alarmed platoon sergeant shouted, "Sir, I wouldn't – "

Before he could finish the sentence, there was a muffled thump, and the top of Lieutenant Peterson's right combat boot blew upward, blossoming open briefly like a red flower as the charge of buckshot from the weedfield mine Baker had left behind tore a 12 gauge hole through his foot. Jerking his wounded appendage up off the ground, he looked at it, loudly took the Lord's name in vain, and immediately fainted.

"Smith!" the sergeant sighed at the radio man even as the medic began cutting Peterson's ruined boot away from his equally ruined foot, "Get another freakin' med-evac." Gesturing with his rifle, he added, "The rest of you, secure our perimeter and sit tight."

As far as the sergeant was concerned, the med-evac could take its damned time. Not because he didn't feel sorry for the XO – which he didn't, truth be told, because, like the now truly half-assed Captain, he considered the officer a complete moron and good riddance – but because he was in no hurry to chase after the guerrillas, lest his unit actually catch up to them, and get close enough for a repeat performance.

Sometimes, you've just go to cut your losses! There'll be other days, and I'd like for us to live to see 'em!

Listening to all the increasingly excited chatter coming over their radio, US Army 1st Lieutenant Adey looked at Sergeant Collins and said, "Damn; it sounds like the Marines and the 101st are really stuck into it over there!"

The sergeant grimaced, shifting his chafing body armor and wishing he had a cigarette.

"It sounds like their getting their asses handed to them, sir."

"Damn," Adey muttered a second time, then flashed a halfway grin devoid of humor. "They can have it."

"Amen to that, sir; better them than us. Listening to that, I'm pretty glad for this assignment. We might be walking our asses off, but other than that, it's pretty much cake."

"You don't think we're likely to get in on this action then?"

Collins snorted and shifted his armor again.

"Not likely, sir; they're a good twenty miles away, all the way over in the next county. Besides, nothing ever happens here; it's a safe area. We've been here six months, and the closest thing we've seen to a guerrilla was when we caught that kid poaching deer with a crossbow."

"I wonder why? I mean, why they don't seem to come here?"

Waving a hand at the surrounding low-visibility brush, the sergeant asked, "What's here worth fighting over, unless you're defending a berry patch?" He chuckled. "With all due respect, sir, it's been my experience that you never look a gift horse in the mouth."

"Now it's my turn to say 'amen,'" Lieutenant Adey told him.

Thumper had been traveling with them, moving up and down and around their formation as he saw fit, when Sam saw him suddenly stop in his tracks and go fully alert, standing stock-still and staring intently at the thick woods ahead of them, his nostrils twitching. The monstrous bulldog had been his before the canine had pretty

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much switched his allegiance to Samantha, and he knew his old buddy pretty well.

His imitation of a pigeon's call caught their attention, and a rapid motion of his hand that was passed on by the ones who saw it brought them all to a halt, and the former pig farmer's bushy eyebrows pulled together in a deep frown.

If that was a deer ahead, he'd be wagging his tail, and if it was a coyote, he'd be twitching it, getting ready to go kick some ass. Right now, he's holding it straight out behind him, stiff as a gun barrel.

The dog turned and looked at Sam first, then at the rest as if seeking an answer, but they had no way of figuring out his question. After a moment, the wind shifted, and Thumper lost the scent of whatever it was he'd scented. He began moving ahead once more, but cautiously this time, swiveling his big head back and forth, his nostrils flared.

Frank knew enough about dogs to know something was up, and he found himself instinctively flaring his own nostrils, vainly trying to catch a whiff of whatever – or whoever – it was, even as he listened and stared at the opaque wall of brush. His left hand seemed to be drawn to the spot on his chest where his family's old brass locket rested against his skin; he had a powerful itch there suddenly.

Something's wrong! I don't know what, but it's wrong!

Frank made a calculated decision. He knew standard procedure was to send a man ahead to scout, but that idea definitely had its problems. He knew the enemy was somewhere in his rear, but had no way of knowing just how far away they were, so they couldn't afford to wait. Also, if there were enemies ahead and they were on the ball, or the scout was just unlucky, he might be spotted, and the man would certainly be killed by any patrol-sized unit before the others could come to his aid. Worse, they'd be stuck into a firefight with an opponent in the front, maybe long enough for more to catch up.

Besides, the only direction left that we can go is forward, so we might as well do it together, where we can hopefully put enough firepower on anyone out there to kill them before they kill us.

Frank swallowed hard and whispered a brief prayer for his wife and daughter before acting and leaving the rest up to God.

He quickly began making hand motions, and, in obedience, Cynthia and Victoria moved closer to Samantha, Carla, and Linda, Cynthia actually stepping directly in front of the colonel, putting herself between her boss and anything that might be coming at them from the front. The little group moved to the center of the line ten yards behind Frank. Billy and Jim moved up until they were beside him in a skirmish line, fifty yards out on either side. Billy was on his right and Jim on his left, while Sam maintained his position as rearguard, just in case the danger came from that direction. Once everyone was in position, they moved forward again, more slowly this time, straining to listen for any alien sound over the wind that masked not only their own movements, but also those of whatever was ahead of them, be it one of the other groups of Irregulars, the rescue party sent by Lucky Charlie, or something else all together.

They didn't have long to wait, no more than two minutes

If anyone had had time to consider the matter, they would have been hard put to tell who was more surprised; the Confederates or the point man of Lieutenant Adey's twenty-strong platoon of Federal soldiers when they topped a shallow rise and abruptly came face to face with barely fifteen yards between them in the thick brush. In a perfect application of Murphy's Law to the inherent chaos of war, Danny Drucci's company, forward of the main formation, had been moving slightly faster than Frank's group, and had gradually and unknowingly widened the distance between them to a greater extent than anyone had intended. As a result, the enemy patrol, approaching on a more-or-less perpendicular course, slipped past their rear, each completely unaware of the other, and now...

Outnumbered almost three to one, the guerrillas had one advantage. The enemy platoon had nothing to do with the raid on their recently vacated headquarters miles away, but was simply walking the same path they had walked every day as part of their regular patrol. Because the Confederates hadn't wanted to attract attention anywhere near whatever headquarters they were using at the time, and because there was nothing of strategic importance within forty miles of the area, it was so quiet the Federals considered it pacified, and their daily ten mile hike nothing more than routine. They had become relaxed and complacent, and it was evident, both in the offhand way they carried their weapons, and in the failure to maintain the proper distance,

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closing up until the column was little more than twenty yards behind the point man, when they walked straight into a wall of fire.

Frank was the first to act by half a second, snapping the rifle to his shoulder and sending a single round into the point man's surprised face before swiveling his aim and firing on the next soldier just behind him.

The crack of his commander's shot had yet to die when Jim dropped the enemy flanker on his side with a three round burst before sliding his hand forward to trigger his grenade launcher. He rode the powerful recoil as he sent a fragmentation round to explode right in the center of the opposing line. Shredded leaves and twigs flew through the air along with the shrapnel, dropping two men, one of them Sergeant Collins.

Billy wasn't far behind, but chose to fire his own M203 first. The big biker had always been fond of shotguns, and tended to worry most about threats that were closest to him, so, instead of a grenade, he had an M576 multiple projectile round in the tube, housing 40mm worth of double-ought buckshot. His distance from the target was a little more than ideal, but it was close enough. When he squeezed the trigger, one soldier fell facedown, and another dropped his rifle and staggered to one side, holding a bleeding thigh. More concerned with the ones still able to shoot back in the immediate future, his meaty hand slipped back to the assault rifle's trigger, and he began aiming bursts at anyone in sight.

Three seconds had elapsed since the two groups had run into each other.

The platoon's survivors were torn between finding cover and shooting back, but they quickly began to recover from their initial shock, and even though most of their shots were un-aimed in wild desperation, the air was suddenly full of a deadly two-way hail of bullets zipping through the woods like angry wasps.

Samantha's first thought was for Linda, still latched onto her right breast, and even before her husband engaged his second target, she instantly flung herself back behind the oak tree she had just stepped around, dislodging her startled daughter's suction in the process. Bullets chewed into the trunk where she had been a split second before, sending bark flying and making the baby scream in fear. Unable to go prone with her daughter dangling on her front, she dropped into a kneeling position, leaving Linda hanging in the cloth sling. Quickly aiming her MP5, she triggered a 9mm burst at their attackers in return. She knocked one down and missed a second, but he dropped when her husband stitched him across his armored chest. The first man was still squirming when someone – no one ever figured out just who – put a pair of rounds in his head.

Sam was shooting past them from behind, and metal-jacketed lead was flying all directions as everyone on their side opened up on the Feds as well, unloading everything they had as fast as they could squeeze the triggers. The enemy tried to fight back, but the surprise was on the other side, the grenade launchers had sown panic and confusion, and the inertia of the attack belonged to the Confederates.

Samantha caught a flash of US camo ahead and ripped off another burst, this time having the satisfaction of seeing her target tumble, wounded at least, if not dead.

It was a brief firestorm, and it seemed surreal; even over the noise of the enemy guns, she could pick out the sounds of the guerrillas' individual weapons. Cynthia's MP5s was *ratatattatting* away in controlled bursts just like hers, Vika's AKM and its Russian ammunition made its own distinctive report, Billy's 40mm grenade launcher was going again with a steady, *boom-boom-boom*, as fast as he could load and fire, and the M4s of Frank, Sam and Jim were firing so rapidly their sharp cracks seemed to merge into one.

Frank knew they had one chance, and one chance only; to paraphrase something General Nathan Bedford Forrest had once said, they had put the scare on the Federal soldiers, and they needed to keep it up. They had to take advantage of their inertia to close with the enemy and either put them to flight or, preferably, overwhelm them and kill them all.

"Ladies, cover us!" Frank shouted, "The rest of you, charge!"

Thumper was already on it, and hit the man Frank had shot in the armor just as he began to rise. The 5.56mm bullets hadn't penetrated the soldier's Kevlar and underlying ceramic plates, but had stunned him to the point he was a split second too slow in bringing his weapon to bear on the big dog, and that split second made all the difference in the world. He was still on one knee, and the thudding impact of a hundred-nine pounds of muscle, bone and teeth was clearly audible over the gunfire. The rifle went flying, and he and Thumper rolled over and over in the leaves, locked together. The screaming soldier beat clumsily at him, but

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to no avail. Every muscle in the bulldog's body stood out, squirming like bundles of angry snakes as he closed his powerful jaws and jerked his head back and forth, wagging his tail and snarling with wild joy as he did what he was born and bred to do.

The opposition was in chaos, all order rapidly coming apart. Most of the soldiers were trying to retreat, some already going in the opposite direction at a dead run, but a few desperate ones still there and on their feet counter-charged, firing as they came, the full auto of their discharging weapons sending a hail of spent brass into the leaves and surrounding brush, even as the Confederates did the same. Neither side had far to go, since they were almost on top of each other to start with.

A little over three hundred yards ahead, Lieutenant Danny Drucci jerked to a stop at the sound of the first shot to his rear. He knew good and well Frank was back there, and in less than two seconds he and his squad had reversed directions and were running back the way they came, back towards the fighting. No orders were needed, and caution was traded for speed. They were running all-out, dodging trees and leaping fallen logs, all the while cursing the distance and praying they could get there in time.

Jim Reynolds ejected his magazine and was reaching for a second when he felt a pair of hard punches: one to his chest and the other to his throat. Blood flew past his field of vision and he hit the ground on his back. Unable to figure out why the small patch of open sky he could see through the tree canopy seemed so out of focus and why his vision was tunneling, he spent the last five seconds of his life sure he had slipped and fallen, rather than being shot, wondering why he couldn't seem to get up, and trying to figure out where the hell that spare magazine was, and why his numb fingers couldn't seem to find it.

Despite his excellent fire discipline, Sam Wirtz's magazine quickly ran dry, and he pressed the release, dropping his empty and reaching to his belt for another. Like all of the Confederates, his constant training made it an instinctual matter. He didn't have to look to see what he was doing; his practiced fingers did the work by themselves, even while feet carried him forward, and his eyes stayed fixed on what was happening in front of them. Suddenly they widened in fear at what they saw.

No! No, damn it, not her!

Victoria Slastyonoff was standing and firing, using a gum tree barely wider than she was for cover, when her AKM chose that time to expend the last round in the clip. She immediately ejected it, and was frantically trying to slam home another, concentrating so hard on what she was doing that she failed to see Lieutenant Adey, ahead and to one side, drawing a bead on her with his M16. A split-second before he fired, someone slammed into her with astonishing force, stunning her, knocking the wind out of her and throwing her to the ground. It took her a shocked instant to realize it was Sam who had tackled her, knocking her down and out of the line of fire that sought her life, and was chewing up the bark of the tree instead, sending its woody fragments raining down over them.

Flat on top of Victoria, Sam vaguely felt the supersonic whiplash of a bullet cut along his left shoulder on its way by, but in the adrenaline rush, he ignored it even as he brought his weapon to his shoulder. He returned fire, and saw the officer throw up both hands and go over backwards. An instant later, he had leaped to his feet and was up and moving, continuing his charge even as he kept squeezing the trigger, showering the ground around the Russian with hot brass.

"Load and keep your ass *down*!" she heard him shout, and then he was gone back to the fight.

Frank's burst left another soldier's helmet holding most of his brains, and he had just pivoted toward a new target and was in the middle of squeezing the trigger when there was gunfire from his right front, and a massive impact slammed into the right side his face. His entire body twisted one hundred-eighty degrees to the left with his turning head in the lead, flashing stars and strobe lights filled the blackness that had been his vision, and he barely felt the impact with the ground.

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Samantha screamed when she saw her husband spin around and fall as if he had been punched. It began with a "No," and picked up speed, *"Nonononononono!"* faster and faster like a steam engine, and finally turned into an inarticulate roar of rage. Her eyes wide and crazy and teeth bared in a snarl that twisted her beautiful face into something not even remotely human, she left Linda to dangle precariously in her sling and used both hands to bring the MP5 to her shoulder. With eyes for nothing else than the soldier, she aimed and held the trigger of the bucking weapon back, emptying the entire clip into him, and hitting him with almost half the rounds it contained. He was dead before he hit the ground, spraying blood, brains, and bits of uniform.

Carla Dover had never been in a firefight before and could seldom glimpse any targets from where she lay, fully prone on the ground, but she kept hammering rounds into the brush ahead anyway, in hopes of hitting something, or at least of keeping their heads down.

Just do your job, Carla! Keep firing! Oh God, I'm so scared! Cynthia, where are you? OhGodohGodohGod!

Cynthia felt a tug as a metal jacketed 5.56mm bullet passed through her blonde hair, shearing off several strands just below the edge of her cap, but she was only peripherally aware of it. Instead, her attention was focused on the charging enemy soldier only ten yards in front of her that had fired the three-round burst. Before his last bullet left the barrel, she was already replying with an identical burst of her own, two rounds of which hit his body armor and staggered him. She followed that with another burst and then a third, all within two seconds, and the target fell on his back, the femoral artery in his right leg severed and still pumping, despite the hole in his left cheek where her final shot had tunneled its way into his brain.

She shot him one more time, just to be sure.

Billy fired his last fragmentation grenade, and sent it flying into the brush ahead, where there was a blast and some more screaming. Snapping open the breech, his practiced fingers began reloading with buckshot rounds once more, with the loading and firing taking less than five seconds a shot even while he continuously advanced. He methodically sent a deadly hail at the enemies he could see as well as the spots any unseen ones were likely to be, moving forward at a fast walk and spreading his aim along the front so the patterns were side by side. Leaves and branches flew and twisted as if in a violent windstorm

Several rounds howled past him, and he instinctively turned and fired at the sound, shredding the opposing flanker from only twenty yards away.

Frank, blinked rapidly. He was aware that he was lying with his facedown in the dry leaves, but it took a second or two for him to remember how he had gotten there. When he turned his head slightly the dizziness made him want to retch and he wondered how badly he had been hit, but then he saw his rifle, he knew. The action was dented in, partly crushed by the bullet that had struck it, driving it against his face, the right side of which was completely numb. He figured it was probably just as well for now, since he could feel the blood oozing from his mouth, and his tongue found several loose, jagged, hard objects that felt suspiciously like the remains of teeth. Suddenly the stunned glaze fell from him at the realization of...

Sammie! Linda!

By then, a pair of advancing soldiers in the middle of a counter-charge were almost to him.

The nearer soldiers had seen Frank fall and assumed he was dead, and turning their attention to his comrades. That was a bad mistake. Hand to hand combat seldom happened in modern war, but seldom is not the same as never.

Frank grabbed his weapon and shot back up on his feet once more in a quick and violent resurrection, his face and the front of his shirt stained crimson and his bloody teeth bared as he roared his defiance that was mirrored by Samantha's cry of joy at seeing him still alive. He threw the ruined remains of his rifle end over end at the nearest soldier, less than ten feet away. The man flinched back, jolted by the hard impact, and by the

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time he had recovered, Frank had closed the distance faster than anyone watching would have thought possible.

Frank's hand reached for the old .45 riding in his shoulder holster, but bumped the knife he carried upside down on his combat harness, and it was the micarta grip his fingers closed around instinctively. There was no time to change his mind, so that was what he went with. His thumb broke the snap integral to the grip that had fastened it into its matching fastener on the Kydex sheath, he snatched the Entrek Ranger, a Persian fighter/Bowie design with a double-edged nine-inch blade, and threw himself on the two men before they had time to react.

Batting aside the rifle barrel of the nearest with his left hand, he ignored the blisters that instantly raised on his calloused palm when his fingers closed around the hot metal just as he ignored the powder burn when it went off, ripping his sleeve and singing the skin of his forearm. He jerked forward hard and to his left, turning the enemy soldier quartered away from him. Jumping in close, his right elbow raised as he corkscrewed his arm counterclockwise, thrusting at a downward angle, plunging the broad blade through the narrow gap between the body armor and the helmet's rim, and into the neck of the soldier, just at the point of his jaw.

With no hesitation, Frank twisted and jerked the blade to his right, slashing back towards the spine on withdrawal, and the keen edge grated on the neck vertebra as it severed the spinal cord. The man went limp, dropping like a puppet with its strings cut, but the General had already forgotten him, and continued the motion of withdrawing the blade to engage the second startled soldier, just turning towards him.

From Samantha's terrified vantage point, it was almost a blur. The Entrek whipped across Frank's body to the right, slashing the foregrip where the soldier's hand grasped it, and it was only afterwards she realized those pale white things she saw dropping in the leaves were a pair of severed fingers. Well before they had hit the ground, he had slashed back the other way, hitting his enemy's right forearm. Due to the metal removed by its double grinding, the Ranger's blade was light for its large size, but it was more than heavy and sharp enough, especially when backed by someone of Frank's strength and skill, to cut clear through the radius and break the ulna, and leave the arm dangling from a bloody strip of meat and skin not even three fingers wide. Reversing direction again, Frank slashed a downward, backhanded stroke at the soldier's throat. The blade bit bone and the force of the blow spun him away and sent him falling.

Letting him go for the moment, Frank's turning motion continued, spinning himself down to the ground, dropping the knife while his fingers closed on the enemy's fallen rifle. Before he could bring it to bear on anyone, another soldier made the mistake of charging around a tree and running headlong into an unseen Billy, who was coming around the other side. He caromed off the big man's chest, and the biker responded by knocking him backwards with a hard cross-body thrust of his weapon. Billy followed up by driving the heel of his size-14 boot in a front thrust kick into the hapless soldier's body armor. Driven off his feet by the powerful blow, he hit the ground on his back, and Billy shot him under the chin, severing his spine where it joined his head, and taking a flake of skull along with it.

The noise abruptly increased as a squad of Irregulars, led by Danny Drucci, hit what was left of the enemy from the rear with guns blazing and Rebel yells echoing over it all.

The Irregulars were in full charge, and never slowed down, plowing right into the surprised soldiers and blasting them at point-blank range. Drucci was in the thick of it, leading from the front, shouting and swearing like a madman.

Someone – an enemy, without doubt – yelled something about surrendering, but it was drowned out in the roar of the rifles and grenades, and Drucci screaming for the adrenaline-charged Rebels to keep their shots low, to keep from hitting their comrades on the other side. Neither the enemy's cries nor their commander's orders affected the Confederate assault; as the first one was silenced in a handful of seconds and the second didn't really matter because they were too close to miss.

Lieutenant Drucci's arrival was followed fifteen seconds later by that of Captain Harrison and his men, who got there barely in time to fire a shot.

In the aftermath, the silence was deafening, and the loudest noise, other than Linda's cries, was the breathing of the late-coming Irregulars, who were wheezing and gasping, having run full-speed in order to get there in time.

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"Secure a – freakin' – perimeter!" Harrison gasped, and the men obeyed, literally staggering now that they finally had time to breathe.

"Sorry – we're late," Drucci finally managed, "Is everybody – okay?"

Samantha was already running forward, keeping low and clutching her howling, frightened baby even while feeling like she was going to faint when she saw Frank sitting on the ground with legs splayed, the recently captured rifle lying across his knees, a somewhat dazed look on his face while he gingerly poked simultaneously at his face and his chest, wincing as he probed with his fingers.

"Frank! Are you hit?"

"I don't think so, at least not badly." She was horrified when she got close; his voice was garbled due to his badly split lips and the right side of his face that was already swelling. He paused and turned his head to spit out another mouthful of blood and dental work. "That round busted my rifle and knocked it into my face; it broke some teeth, and I think I might have a little bit of shrapnel from the bullet jacket just under the skin on my chest, but nothing serious. Is everybody okay?" Scooping up his knife and getting suddenly to his feet, the adrenaline almost bouncing him up, he brushed her hands away that were gingerly wiping at his face and told her, "We'll worry about it later, honey; we don't have time right now." Grasping her right hand, he kissed her fingertips and left a broad scarlet smear that cut her heart like a knife when she saw it.

Suddenly he grinned, or tried to.

"You'd better close your shirt, honey; you're kind of hanging out there."

Those simple, homey words made her feel like crying for joy even as she blushed and tucked her breast away, having forgotten it's exposure due to more pressing matters.

Turning to the others, droplets of blood flying from his mouth as he barked, "Get their radios, cell phones, and any weapons, ammo and grenades, and let's get gone! Hurry up!" Looking around, he asked, "Where's Jim?"

Billy indicated the body with a jerk of his head, and they caught the faint, brief glimmer of a tear in his eye as his tightly-clenched lips writhed together. Frank looked, and saw Carla, already kneeling beside the fallen guerrilla, sit back on her heels and shake her head sadly. The totally loyal man whose life Frank had once saved was lying on his back now, arms outspread and his right leg folded beneath him, staring blankly at the leafy canopy overhead. He had bled almost white from the round that passed through his chest and the one in his neck that severed his carotid artery.

"Didn't make it," the giant said, a slight quaver in his voice before looking away. Jim had been his partner in guarding Samantha for months now, and the two had become close friends.

"Damn it!" Seeing them starting to bunch up and let down their guard, he sprayed a fine mist of blood from his mouth when he yelled, his words slurred by his wound, "Sam, Billy, stay ready!" Noticing Sam holding his shoulder that was leaking blood onto his shirt, he pointed to it and told Carla, "Get that bound up! The rest of you, keep watching! Cynthia, Vika; finish gathering the stuff and let's go!" Looking back down at their dead friend, he added, "We'll mourn later."

Of that, he had no doubt.

Samantha turned, ignoring Linda's cries for the moment, and knelt down beside their fallen friend to gently close his eyes with her fingertips.

"I'll miss you, Jim," she told him with a sob, baptizing the body with her tears while pulling his bent leg from beneath him and straightening it before folding his arms across his chest. While she worked, Thumper came up, drenched in arterial blood not his own, sniffed Jim, and licked his face once, leaving a red streak. He lowered both his head and his tail and whined, then let out a mournful howl, offering his own sorrow that only made Samantha's grief even more poignant.

We don't have time for anything else, but this is the least I can do! My God, we've been through so much together!

"What about this one?" Victoria asked quietly, gesturing toward the second man on the end of Frank's knife attack. She had bent over to retrieve his rifle and saw that he was not quite dead...not yet.

When Frank had made his final slash, at the last instant the already doubly-wounded man had raised his shoulder and hunched his helmet towards it in an attempt to protect himself from what would have

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undoubtedly been a fatal blow. His frantic movement had worked, more or less, and the big knife's edge had glanced off his body armor and the Kevlar brim of his helmet and cut across the face instead of ripping through his throat.

Frank looked critically at the soldier who lay moaning and whimpering on the ground. The last powerful chop had split his flesh, breaking his cheekbone and cutting diagonally across both lips and his chin, leaving half his face hanging open to show the deeply scored bones and chattering teeth. It had had also cut his helmet strap, allowing the headgear to roll away and revealing his features. Despite the ghastly wound and the blood, they saw the wide-eyed frightened face of a sandy-haired boy who couldn't have been more than eighteen staring back at him through his tears of pain and terror.

Damn it, he's just a kid!

He tried to crawl away when Frank approached, but screamed when he put the stump of his nearly severed arm down and drove the dry stems of the fallen leaves into his mangled flesh.

"Hold still!" Frank ordered. "Vika, help me get his boots unlaced."

While the Russian started on the left boot, Frank had already gotten the right lace free, and proceeded to convert it to a makeshift tourniquet, threading a stick through it and twisting it tight just above the amputation, slowing the spurting arterial blood to a trickle. Grabbing the other string from Victoria, he quickly wound it around the stumps of the severed fingers of the other hand, tying it off tightly around each, one after the other. They took a moment to raise his feet by stuffing a no-longer needed set of body armor beneath them and they threw a poncho over him to help fight against shock.

"That's all we've got time for," Frank told him as he picked up the captured rifle and rose to his feet, "You might want to pray, boy, but if you live, go back home where you belong, and stay there this time!"

"Y-y-yes s-sir!" he slurred through his mutilated mouth, and Frank turned away, gazing at the shadows of the darkening forest ahead. He became aware that his head was spinning, his vision was slightly blurred, and he knew he had a concussion, but he couldn't show it for the sake of the others. He also had to get moving for his own sake before the pain really set in. Shaking his head in an effort to clear the cobwebs, and instantly regretting it when a wave of increased pain and momentary dizziness swept over him, his eyes suddenly took on a strange light.

"The woods are lovely, dark and deep, but I have promises to keep, and miles to go before I sleep," he said, his bleeding, swollen mouth barely moving in a whisper. *So many damned miles!*

Cynthia raised her brows, Billy and Sam looked at one another in surprise, and Samantha tentatively said, "Frank?"

Shaking himself as if coming out of a trance, he said, "Robert Frost. Come on; we've got a ways to go yet. Drucci, have your unit take the front, and Harrison, you've got rear guard. Let's move!"

With that, he took off on the run, and the others followed.

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DAY 767
CHAPTER 16

USA News Network,
Embedded Reporter's Bulletin

A large force of Confederate terrorists numbering in the hundreds and led by the racist, renegade ex-cop Franklin Gore launched a cowardly ambush against a platoon of American troops patrolling in South Carolina today. Outnumbered almost twenty to one, the patrol fought back, killing an estimated one hundred of the enemy before being overrun. With every member of the patrol wounded and out of ammunition, they were forced to surrender to the terrorist forces. Following that honorable surrender, once our troops had been disarmed, Gore, accompanied by his mistress and partner in crime, Samantha Norris, ordered the execution of all but one of them. Twenty brave, wounded soldiers were brutally tortured before being hacked and shot to death.

*They had a special fate in store for lone survivor, Private Joseph Cast. Gore told him he wanted him to take a message back to the American people. According to Cast, Gore said, "Tell those mother****ers that if they raise a hand against us, we'll cut it off!" Then, while several of his men held Private Cast down, the terrorist leader personally sawed both of the helpless soldier's hands off with a serrated-edge knife, in the manner of the terrorists of the Taliban. Then Norris told the crippled man she wanted him to have something to remember her by, and mutilated his face with a knife. Finally, after robbing and mutilating the dead, they fled into the woods, leaving Private Cast to bleed to death.*

Using no more than his teeth and tongue, Cast managed to get improvised tourniquets around the spurting stumps of his wrists, and save his life. He is now in the Bethesda Naval Hospital, where he is listed in critical condition...

Conversation, Bethesda Naval Hospital, Room 4A

"*But sir, it didn't happen that way! General Gore wounded me in the fight, and then saved my life!*"

"*You will never refer to that terrorist son of a bitch as a general again, do you understand, Private?*"

"*But...*"

"*No buts! Don't you get it, dumbass? You stick with the story we gave you, and I can guarantee you the Medal of Honor.*"

"*But it's all bullshit, sir! I won't take a medal I don't deserve, and I won't be a party to a lie! I won't – Ahhhgh!*"

"*It hurts when somebody presses on a wound, doesn't it? Have I got your attention now? Good, now you listen to me you treacherous, ungrateful little shit! This country needs heroes, and right now, you're it! You'll say what we tell you to say, and you'll take that medal without a peep, or I will bring charges against you that you went over to the terrorists, and helped them set up that ambush! I mean it; I'll charge you with treason, and I'll charge your family with being sympathizers! I'll pack you off to the interrogation center, and you can watch while the 'squeezers' pork your mama and your whore of a girlfriend in the ass right in front of you, trying to get information you don't have to give. Then, after they're done, they'll execute you all!*

"*Look at me, damn you! Do you believe I'll do it?*"

"*Y-y-yes, s-sir, I believe you.*"

"*Then are you going to do what you're told? Don't nod at me, piss-ant; are you going to obey my orders*

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or not?"

"*Yes sir."*

"*Good boy; maybe you're not as stupid as you look..."*

"How is Frank?"

Sam looked up from the kitchen chair where he was sitting in their latest safe house, courtesy of Charlie Carnes' men who had picked them up only an hour after the fight. The Colonel's elbows propped on the table and his hands were cradling a glass of whiskey, trying to get comfortable, and the motion caused a twinge in his wounded shoulder. He flinched almost imperceptibly, although, in truth, it was as much as the sight of who had just walked into the room as it was the physical pain.

"Hey, Vika. They think he'll be okay in a few days. He's resting right now; Sammie's in there with him."

"How badly was he hurt?" she asked, taking the seat next to him, "It looked terrible."

"Other than a couple of stitches in his chest where they dug that fragment of bullet jacket out from under his skin, most of the injuries were to his face. When that bullet hit his rifle, it drove the stock into the right side of his cheek and jaw. They tell me it broke off two of his upper molars – they couldn't repair the damage with what we have, so they gave him the standard anesthetic – a couple shots of whiskey and a big hit of weed – before they pulled out the pieces that were left of them without any Novocain." Sam hated dentists; they were the only thing he feared, and he cringed visibly at the thought of what that must have felt like. "His lips are busted and his cheek's split, so he'll have some more scars where they sewed them up, but at least they'll heal. The main concern is that they think he might have re-fractured some of the breaks in his facial bones he got when he was wounded up in North Carolina, and he almost certainly has a concussion. I got no doubt he's hurting like hell, but he's damned lucky, considering what almost happened…I reckon we all are. If that rifle hadn't been between him and that round, he'd be dead right now."

Victoria saw him look away as he muttered that last sentence, and her sharp ears picked the faintest catch in his voice.

He truly loves his friend. I think I understand what Southerners think about brotherhood and family a little better. They don't just believe it; they live it!

"So, how are you?"

He shrugged, offering her a deprecating smile.

"I'm so stiff I can hardly move. All that running, and then the adrenaline from the fight – I'm definitely paying for it now." Holding up the half empty glass, his smile grew. "It's all right, though; I'm starting to relax with ol' Doc Painkiller here."

"What about your shoulder?" she asked, a bit more impatiently.

"Not much more than a scratch. They put a few stitches in it, but I don't think it really needed it. My legs hurt worse from all the running." Shaking his head, he added, "I'm getting too old for this crap."

"You saved my life, Sam." Her voice was suddenly tiny, like a child's.

He gave her a very strange, almost pained look and shrugged again.

"You'd have done the same for me, or for any of us."

"No, I wouldn't have," she said, the blood running to her cheeks, making her blush with humiliation, "I would have probably just stood there like, like, how do you say it? Like a-a *dumbass*, just like I was doing when you knocked me down to keep me from getting killed! You got hurt – almost killed – because I didn't think! I didn't…"

Sam saw she was beginning to cry, and he sighed as he reached out to put his right hand over her left. Instantly her right clamped down hard on top of his.

"How many firefights have you been in, Vika?"

"That was my first, but I've been trained – "

He interrupted her. "All right then; so you've been trained. Training's good, but it's no substitute for experience. It's like the difference between school and a job; they're two entirely different worlds. Learn from it, honey; learn from it, pick yourself up, and go on. It's a lesson we both survived – that's the important part – and I guarantee you'll know what to do the next time, so don't be so hard on yourself. You'll do fine."

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“Thank you, Sam,” she told him as she pulled her hands away and rose to her feet, “Thank you for saving my life, but thank you even more, for…that.”

“You’re welcome; don’t worry about it.”

Quickly brushing away her tears with the back of one hand, she carefully rested it on his good shoulder and leaned down to kiss his cheek. She murmured “Thanks,” one last time and then turned and left the room.

Sam sat there unmoving in his chair, watching her go until the door closed behind her. His face twisted as if in pain, and he lifted his partly-empty glass and downed the remainder at a gulp.

Afterwards, he simply sat there in silence, staring at the closed door Victoria had gone through, and thinking hard while trying his best not to.

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DAY 780

CHAPTER 17

The Vice President of the United States, Jay Loveland Roberts, was a Minnesota native, with the common sense inherited from his no-nonsense farming forebears. That meant he knew something was up when the Speaker of the House invited him to dinner at his Washington estate in the exclusive Virginia 'horse country,' and he knew whatever it was, it was big, because the Senate Majority Leader was there as well, and obviously expecting him. Being from different parties – Democrat and a Republican respectively – the pair didn't socialize much. In fact, their political battles were almost legendary, so he knew it would take more than the mundane to bring them together.

Still, he had to contain his patience until the fine dinner had been cleared away, a finer brandy had been poured, and the trio had adjourned to the atrium. The luxurious leather upholstery creaked as they sat, while, through the window, he could see the darkness taking the palatial estate's pastures outside.

The Speaker and the Senator exchanged knowing glances, and it was the Republican who broke the ice. Harland Goss had been the Senator for Nebraska for thirty years now, and he not only knew where all the bodies were buried, but he was not one to beat around the bush. Leaning forward, resting his elbows on his knees as he cupped the snifter of golden liquid in both hands, he said, "We have a problem."

Something in his tone smacked of conspiracy, but then again, when it came right down to it, all politics were conspiracy, the Vice President supposed.

Never let 'em see you sweat!

Roberts forced a chuckle and took a sip from his glass before speaking, not savoring the brandy as much as taking the time to think of what he wanted to say.

"Which one? From the looks of things, we've got several; between the war and the economy…" His voice trailed off as the Speaker, Representative Aaron Huntington of New Hampshire, waved his glass at him, his high domed forehead wrinkled under his thinning white hair.

"It's bigger than that, I'm afraid. It's the President."

Well, that was unexpected!

"Is there a threat to him?"

Goss looked at him sharply over his glasses.

"The threat isn't *to* him," the Republican said carefully, his words perfectly neutral but his meaning unmistakable.

"I see," Roberts told him noncommittally as he quickly sifted through the implications of what he had just been told. What the Majority Leader had said was true, beyond any doubt, but that had far less immediate bearing on the subject than what could very well happen to him personally if this were a trap. He knew he was too big to be given a show trial for treason, but he was equally certain he wasn't too big to die from a "sudden heart attack" or to be given a bullet in the back of the skull, most likely by a "Southern terrorist assassin," who would, of course, not be taken alive for trial; all very convenient. Presumably, that's why both the leaders of Congress, staunch party rivals, had gotten together: to reassure him.

But the risk…

Still, even more terrifying, was the risk if they ignored the problem, hoping it would go away.

The loss of the whole country…

At that thought, Roberts decided, *Let the dance begin.*

"That fear has crossed a lot of people's minds, I think."

"What exactly do *you* think?" the Speaker asked him, and Roberts smiled, an expression completely devoid

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of humor. If he was going to stretch his neck across the block, he wasn't going to do it alone.

"I think you'd better go first."

"Very well." Goss took a deep breath. "We think President Plants is going mad – dangerously mad, if he isn't there already."

Beside him, Representative Huntington nodded his agreement.

"Okay," the Vice President said, "I'll admit there is evidence for that – "

The Speaker snorted, "Evidence?" but Roberts ignored him and went on.

"– but that is less important than the question of what we can do about it." Spreading his hands, palms-up, he asked, "Any ideas? After all, he is the President…"

"And with emergency powers; yes, we know that all too well. The thing you need to remember is that he is not the government."

"He might argue with that."

"No doubt he would," the Senator affirmed, "That's part of his megalomania, which, in our opinion and that of many others, is pathological. He's forgotten that our system of government is a balance of powers; both official and otherwise."

Roberts looked him squarely in the eye. "Otherwise? Just who are you referring to, Senator Goss? Since he's indefinitely suspended the elections, I don't think the President is overly concerned with the media or his campaign contributors at this moment."

Goss sighed and took off his glasses, polishing the lenses that didn't need it.

"We all know you're not a stupid man, Roberts, and it would be to your advantage to stop acting like it."

"The President has too much power to stand for an impeachment, and, in spite of everything, he's done nothing to justify a coup."

There; I said the "c" word, exactly what we're all thinking.

"You are correct," Huntington affirmed, "He has done nothing to merit that…*yet*."

The Vice President didn't miss the emphasis.

"But you believe he may be going to."

After exchanging a brief glance with his opposite number in the Senate, Huntington nodded in affirmation.

"He's done some very questionable, often very brutal things, and, even worse, he's done them to no avail. Hawaii is gone, the South is in virtually full rebellion, and Plants' only real accomplishment has been to destroy what little goodwill America still had on the international scene. We're sinking fast, and things are getting desperate, and not just economically."

"President Plants knows this," Goss broke in, "and he's growing increasingly desperate himself. Desperate men are the ones who do desperate, destructive things, and he's a prime candidate for that, especially as the Confederates continue making gains."

"You know we're losing this war, then?"

"We lost this war all the way back in 1865," Huntington told him, "when the Congress allowed Lincoln to destroy the Republic in order to save the Union. If we had let them go then, we would be allies now." He curled his narrow lip, exhibiting the classic Yankee distaste for Southerners. "Besides, do we really want a bunch of redneck savages as part of America?"

"I don't know if losing it is the right term," Goss said, steering the conversation back on track, "but we are not winning it. I don't believe we can win it; there's been too much blood spilled on both sides for anyone to just quit. My greatest fear is that it will just keep driving on and on, until it weakens us to the point that still more of our country becomes prey for China, just like Hawaii. We've had to step back from them once already; where will we have to step back next? California? Alaska? The whole West Coast? We can't do that, but if we keep on like we are, that's the choice we'll be faced with." He paused for rhetorical dramatic effect. "That or nuclear war…with China or with the South first, then with China *and* Russia."

"What?" Roberts was sure he had not heard the last part of that sentence right.

"Did you know that President Plants has been wargaming scenarios involving multiple nuclear strikes on the Southern States, primarily targeting their major population centers?"

"*What?!"* Roberts repeated again, only this time, instead of curious inquiry, the word came out as an

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outraged shout. Part of it was that, as Vice President, he should have been in the loop of any exploration of anything that important, but mainly it was because of his horror at what was being discussed.

"Since you obviously don't know, that means Plants' paranoia has reached the point where he doesn't even trust *you*," Goss put in, "but that's not our primary concern at this time.

"If you think Plants frightens us, put yourself in the place of the Russians and Chinese; after the Southerners, most of his rhetorical venom is directed toward them. Considering Plants has one of the largest nuclear arsenals in the world literally at his fingertips, you'd better believe they've been listening. The Russians in particular; since they've got a few hundred 'advisors' with the Rebels, they know they're the main potential target, and, while the Chinese might have future designs on the eastern Russia, they definitely don't want a nuclear war on their border. The Russians want the Confederacy as an ally against the Chinese; however, if the Confederate Cause is destroyed, particularly by nuclear weapons, that leaves an alliance with China as their only hope for long-term survival, as distasteful and ultimately expensive as that may be to them. While we don't have the details, we know there have been secret talks between the two on this subject for some months now, and we believe they're nearing an agreement on what their mutual reaction will be should our President let the nuclear genie out of the bottle. Since, from their view, if Plants is willing to nuke his own people…well, that's a threat they are not prepared to tolerate, particularly from their main rival: the unstable leader of an even less-stable country, and who personally has a long record of hostility towards both countries already. It is our belief that they would launch a preemptive and utterly overwhelming first strike in such a case."

Roberts had trouble bringing himself to ask the obvious question.

"And the President is aware of this…probability?"

Goss looked at him gravely.

"Yes; virtually everyone of his military advisors have warned him of exactly that potential result."

"And he's still war-gaming a strike on the South?"

"Yes. He reportedly thinks it's worth the risk that they might be bluffing." Looking levelly at the Vice President, he added, "Our best information indicates that they are not."

"Jesus…"

"I don't think Jesus has got much to do with this," Huntington told him, "This is courtesy of the three main players; China, Russia, and President Plants."

"You mean Russia, China, and the United States."

Goss snorted. "I mean Plants; the good of the United States, or the desires of the American people or those of Congress don't figure into it anymore, and haven't for a long time. This is solely the President's show, but if he goes down, he'll take us all down with him. That is simply unacceptable; he cannot be permitted to destroy everything in order to save a part of it…to save his own ego, really. Under no circumstances can that be allowed, regardless of what it takes to stop it; do you understand?"

Roberts nodded grimly. As Vice President, he had had all the briefings, and fully understood what that would mean.

"You're right; that can't be allowed to happen. Not nuclear war, especially not between super powers, at least not if there's any other way."

Goss nodded sagely and said, "We know. That's where you come in.

"I don't have to tell you there's a force within every branch of our government and military that has been keeping tabs on President Plants, just as they kept an eye on Clinton, Bush, and Obama. These are not Southern dissident elements per se, but patriot elements, who understand that their loyalty is not to the man or even the government as such, but to the country and its people. They won't let everything be destroyed because of one man's megalomania; *we* won't let it be destroyed. We're depending on you not to let it be destroyed either."

"So what are you asking me to do?"

"If the time comes, whatever you have to. We'll stand behind you one hundred percent, and we will see to it that both parties, the media, and the American public do the same."

"But the Secret Service will be standing in front of me."

"Not necessarily."

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Roberts physically jumped, bouncing to his feet in guilty shock at the sound of the voice coming from directly behind him. Even before he spun around, he had already recognized the intruder by his tones, the strong, deceptively simple-sounding California "Valley" accent that marked Agent Woodrow "Woody" Reagan, senior member of the Vice Presidential Secret Service team, assigned to his protection. The man had silently entered sometime during the conversation and was standing right behind his chair, well within arm's reach.

While Roberts gaped like a landed fish, seeing his life suddenly flashing before his eyes, Reagan simply stood there, hands folded at the waist, and his most professional look on his face. Lowering his crew-cut blonde head slightly in a curt, respectful nod, he said, "Mr. Vice President."

"Don't look so surprised," Goss told him, unable to suppress the faintest hint of smugness that crept into his voice, "I told you that true patriots were in *every* branch and department of our government, and the Secret Service is no exception."

Roberts made a real effort to keep his face calm and neutral, but it was more than a little difficult. Not only had the agent's sudden appearance startled the Vice President; it brought home the fact that his very life had depended on the answer he gave only moments ago.

"What would it have been if I had objected, Woody?" he demanded an hour later in the backseat of the limo in a calm, if accusatory tone as he was driven home, "Would you have garroted me, or would it have been bullet in the back of the head?"

"Of course not, sir; that would be too obvious." He pulled an ordinary-looking ink pen out of his shirt pocket and held it up. "This neat little device is an improvement over the famous CIA weapon declassified in 1975 and demonstrated before Congress in pistol form. It contains an extremely tiny needle that dissolves in the human body, releasing a virtually undetectable drug that simulates a heart attack. I would have touched it to your neck, pressed the button, and you would have been dead of natural causes before you left the room.

"I'm really glad it didn't come to that, sir; not only are you America's only hope, but I really like you."

"Believe me, I'm glad it didn't come to that too!"

The agent extended the pen.

"Take it, sir. You may need it."

Roberts gingerly took the lethal object as Woody explained how it worked.

"You might need this yourself…" the Vice President began, but the Secret Service man shook his head.

"Don't worry about it, sir; I have more. In fact, several of us do."

The warning was too obvious to ignore, and Roberts wasn't about to do so. There was no going back. There was too much at stake; not only his own life, but the future of America…or whatever was left of it.

"How are you, Frank?"

"Fine," he told Field Marshal Edge, "No major harm done."

At least to me, anyway. Poor Jim wasn't quite so lucky.

Edge took in the still-healing scars on his lips and right cheek, and the almost imperceptible swelling left on that side of his face, but didn't comment. The man who had become his good right hand was alive, and that was enough.

"Good. That was an excellent bug-out plan, by the way – textbook execution."

"Except for the man we lost," he said softly, and Edge nodded.

"That was a fluke, nothing more; no one could have anticipated that enemy patrol unknowingly wandering between you and your lead elements like that. I liked Jim too, but this is war. We had one dead and two wounded, but between you all, the snipers, and the surprise you left behind, they lost forty-nine dead, twenty-three wounded, a Blackhawk, a Bradley, and two Humvees. That's a successful operation in anyone's book. At least Jim died fighting, and died quick; there are a lot worse ways to go."

"I reckon so," Frank agreed, and took another drink of sweet tea.

The two men sat on cheap plastic patio furniture inside the sunroom of the safe house. With their drinks and sandwiches, they looked like any other pair of friends, which was the purpose, although no one would be likely to see them well enough to recognize them in the late evening darkness, let alone with the blinds pulled,

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which was the reason they were out there. They were also surrounded by concealed snipers equipped with silenced weapons and night vision scopes, just in case someone did. Although the men were out of earshot, the trio still kept their voices down out of long habit.

"Anyway," Edge said, "I need you to set up and handle the logistics for a meeting for me. Admiral Fred Hardy is coming to Charleston in two weeks, and we need a secure site and a scenario that doesn't look like a meeting, plus we're going to need a layered security perimeter around it."

"That's no problem," Frank told him, "Would a motel room suit you?"

"As long as it's a classy one, like something an admiral would be seen at."

"I'll have our resources there reserve it and get the information to you tomorrow, and I should have at least a tentative plan ready for you in three days."

"No later than three days, please; I trust your abilities, but I'd still like to review it, since it's my butt on the line."

The South Carolinian looked at him thoughtfully.

"You expecting trouble?"

"I'm always expecting trouble, but I'm ninety-nine percent sure Hardy won't give me any."

Frank's voice was blunt and to the point.

"If you're one percent not sure, you'd better send someone else."

Edge shook his head.

"No. I know Hardy and he knows me; we were good friends once."

"*Once*," Frank said, emphasizing the word, "and that was better than twenty years ago. A man can change a lot in that time."

A man can change a lot in a hell of a lot shorter time than that too, he knew firsthand.

"We're all examples of that. No, if I have trouble with Hardy, it will be because he's not hard enough to what has to be done."

"I thought he was a SEAL," Frank observed, and his commander nodded.

"He was. Oh, he's always been tough enough, but not hard enough; there's a difference. See, even in the Teams, he had definite limits as to just how far he would go; he had a lot of initiative and creativity, but only within the boundaries he had set for himself. He's a by-the-book man, and he has to be pushed to go beyond standard operating procedure."

"I noticed that in his psychological profile." Seeing Edge's hard blue eyes snap in his direction, Frank continued. "As soon as I met his representative, I put Mike and his Psych Team on it, and found out all I could about him."

The Psych Team – actually the Confederate Army Provisional Psychological Warfare Group, aka CAPPWARG – was made up of half a dozen psychologists whose sole purpose was to analyze the characters of their assigned target subjects. They would evaluate strengths and weaknesses using all the available information, and, if necessary, would assign investigators to dig deeper still. They had been very useful in the few months they had been in existence, and had been responsible for more than just several victories on the battlefield by targeting and profiling enemy officers. They also helped pinpoint those who could be turned, either ideologically or through blackmail, and, as a result, there were currently dozens of Federal soldiers, ranging from privates to colonels, as well as numerous civilian employees and politicians, working willingly or otherwise for the Confederates. Several times that many had been weakened or rendered impotent by CAP intelligence agents who would covertly cause trouble for them in both their professional and personal lives by targeting their careers, their finances, and even their marriages, dividing their attention by keeping their minds on other things besides the war. CAPPWARG operated under the command of Colonel Mike Dayton, who, after all, had been tortured, and had seen the first woman he had ever loved die rescuing him. As far as the CAP Intelligence Officer was concerned these days, there were no dirty tricks, and no limits as to how far he would go, not only to win, but to avenge what had been taken from him.

Frank went on. "I figured that we needed to know even more about a friend than an enemy, because friends are the ones who can really hurt you."

Edge smiled like a shark.

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Damn, this boy is good!

"That was a good move on your part. Of course, I know Hardy, but I'd still like to have a copy of your report on him."

"I'll have a flash drive ready for you before you leave."

Before he realized what he was doing, the always-undemonstrative Edge slapped Frank affectionately on the shoulder, and it was hard to tell who was more startled; the slapper or the slappee.

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DAY 794

CHAPTER 18

"Damn, John, it's been a long time!"

"Too long!" Edge said sincerely, grasping US Admiral Fred Hardy's hand with unfeigned enthusiasm. Looking at his old friend's wrinkles and the graying hair beating a ragged retreat back toward the thinning ranks at the crown of his skull, the Rebel Field Marshal felt like shaking his own head. In some ways, looking at him was way too much like looking in a mirror, and it reminded him of just how old he really was. Still, he didn't let the sad melancholy show in his voice when he said, "Sit down, Fred, and make yourself comfortable."

The pair sat alone, drinking coffee in the Charleston, South Carolina motel suite; the supposed 'hooker' – actually Cynthia Dover, Samantha's bodyguard, borrowed for the occasion, made up and dressed to the slightly trashy side of nines – who had accompanied Hardy, hanging onto his arm and providing the obvious reason for him being in the establishment to anyone who might have noticed, was gone. She had exited through the connecting door into the next room to join the squad of 1st Columbia Irregulars already waiting there in case they were needed. More of the elite unit were scattered around within a block of the place, armed to the teeth and ready, willing and able to use their weapons on a split-second's notice. A second bunch was three blocks out, the two groups forming a pair of invisible perimeters, a wheel within a wheel. All were totally trustworthy or they wouldn't have been there, but both the Confederates and their guest had good reason to be more than a little paranoid about security. The former, in particular, had learned the hard way more than once that no one, no matter how dependable, should ever possess unnecessary knowledge. There was enough danger in the fact that a handful of people had to know that the supreme commander of the Confederate Army Provisional was meeting with a high-ranking US naval officer, without them knowing the specifics of the conversation...specifics that Edge was anxious to find out himself.

Still, for several minutes the conversation was about other things: catching up, for the most part. That was a necessary build-up for them both, not only because of the entrenched culture of politeness in the South, but because it gave them each a chance to observe the other, and take each one's measure as to how he might have changed over the intervening decades since they had last met. Admiral Hardy had to be more than careful, because, in the eyes of the US Government he had given an oath to, he was committing what amounted to nothing less than the very highest treason, and the CAP leader was already a poster-boy for paranoia and the obsessive desire for control. It was very difficult for either of them to trust anyone but himself. Hardy owed Edge his life, but both of them knew, in the enormity of the current situation, that debt couldn't be relied on.

"Damn," the Admiral muttered with a rueful smile, "just look at us!"

Edge shrugged. "Time and events change people," he said, pausing to take a sip of coffee from the hotel-supplied styrofoam cup before gesturing with it, "and war and circumstance can change them even more." Something in his voice told Hardy that he was talking about himself. "So, Fred, what's on your mind?"

"General Lannigan and I have figured out how to pull this off, but it's going to take awhile: a few months at the very least, possibly up to a year at the outside. The sooner the better, though, because we may not have much time."

Edge's eyes widened ever-so-slightly with the heightened interest he was unable to fully conceal. All business now, he wiped his mouth with the back of his hand before sitting the cup down.

Hardy was searching his old friend's face to see what he thinking, but beyond that brief initial interest, he showed no expression at all beyond the slightly pursed lips and even slighter frown that plainly said he was deep in thought. The Admiral could almost hear the wheels spinning in the Confederate Field Marshal's head as he sorted potential profits and problems, possibilities and probabilities. The former SEAL was damned good at that, and his one-time Team member knew better than to derail his train of thought. He decided to wait

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for the question.

"First, what's the rush?"

"President Plants has been having covert studies done on the ramifications of using strategic nuclear weapons to force the South to capitulate."

Edge blinked once, then his hard face set even harder. This information had just made his decision for him; no matter how wild Hardy's project was, it was a go, as long as it had any chance of success whatsoever. The situation the Admiral had just described could not be allowed to happen.

"What have you got in mind?"

"Are you willing to go as far as nuclear blackmail yourself?"

"I'm willing to go as far as it takes."

Edge leaned forward a few more degrees when he made that cold, calm statement, and Hardy knew he meant every last word of it.

"First, we need to get control of some nuclear missiles."

"How do you plan on accomplishing that on Southern soil?" the Field Marshal asked him, "They moved nearly all the missiles out of Dixie years ago. There might be a few left out West but – "

"But those are the ones they would expect us to try for," Hardy finished his sentence for him, "Our best chance is to take a nuclear-armed submarine."

"And in your position, you can make that happen?"

"Yes. I was hoping you'd agree, because I've already started."

Hardy began moving his right index finger up and down unconsciously, ticking off what he had done as he spoke.

"I presented a report to the effect that I was concerned about the security of the Navy's nuclear arsenal in the face of domestic Confederate terrorism." Ignoring the slight twitch of a smile at the corner of Edge's thin lips, he went on. "I never suggested you might try to actually take one – after all, who would believe that? – but that you might attempt to sabotage it, maybe blow it up and contaminate a sub or port with radiation, like a 'dirty bomb.' It was a good report, and scared the shit out of some pretty influential people. I used that as a foot in the door for NSTI – the Naval Security Testing and Improvement program I had included, and managed to get myself put in charge of implementing it. The brass figured that, since I had trained to do that very thing in the SEALs, not to mention that it was my idea, I would be a natural for the job. That gave me the authority, not only to form my own team and enter nearly any base or boat containing nukes, but also to 'suggest' certain personnel transfers. Obviously, my team and those personnel being transferred in are loyal to the Cause, while those being transferred to 'less-sensitive' locations are not."

While the Field Marshal mulled that over, impressed despite himself, the Admiral looked closely at him and added hopefully, "Once we take the nuclear option, you know it will become an all or nothing shot. Do you see any other way to end this thing, once and for all?"

Edge shook his head.

"Not in the foreseeable future. And if we keep grinding along like we have been, we might have other problems than the Yankees; then we won't have a foreseeable future." Smiling grimly, he added, "I'm too old to have to learn to speak Chinese."

"Exactly," Hardy said with a nod of confirmation, "While the US and CS tear at each other, China has been building itself up, and taking a greater and more obvious interest in the events here. They made the US back up and pull out of Hawaii by a combination threat of military force and economic boycott, but America is still too strong for them to challenge it directly here, on our own mainland soil…so far, but that situation can't last. If they could manage a foothold on the North American continent, it would change the entire balance of power in the world. They would be *the* super power, much like the US was during the last part of the 20th century. They would be even more determined than we were to hold that position, and their actions would be much less restrained by public opinion."

Edge nodded his understanding. He understood the Chinese very well, had occasionally fought them in covert operations as a SEAL, and had even been getting a good deal of weaponry from them in the past few months, but he wasn't about to take the "alliance" their agents had been hinting at. Yes, the Confederates could

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join with them, and there was no question that their combined might could defeat the Union. However, there was equally no doubt that afterwards, without any other force capable of checking their expansion, the Chinese would politely but firmly turn their eyes south of the Mason-Dixon. Even if the South won the war today, they would still be unable to mount a credible military resistance against the Chinese, particularly if Beijing controlled the North and had all their resources at their disposal. The Confederates hadn't fought this long and hard to be a vassal state, or at best a satellite of a nation even more ruthless than the Yankees, and one made up of racial, religious and ideological aliens to boot.

"I can't argue with that," he agreed, "so let's discuss the sub. I take it you have a particular one in mind?"

"We've got several possibilities. For the past few months, I've been working behind the scenes, quietly causing some transfers that are seeding the crews of several of them with Southerners or sympathizers. I've also encouraged the beefing up of security in the form of SEAL teams that are heavy with people of similar ideals."

"The Secret Team," Edge said flatly, and Hardy jerked in surprise as if he had been slapped. "Yeah, I was never on it, but I know about it; we've got people in our own intelligence network too, and they confirmed that you're a member, just like General Lannigan is a member of Red 4, which is why we're talking to you."

They know, and they've got this to hold over my head now! There will be no going back. But then, there never was any going back…

"But…how?" he asked, trying to make time in order to get himself together.

"You don't really expect me to answer that, do you?"

"No," Hardy said, recovering, "I guess not. I just didn't realize your intelligence was that good."

"If it wasn't, we'd all be dead by now, so we do our homework. Remember, most of us were on your side once, part of the US military, with more coming over from yours to ours every day and still more covert sympathizers remaining behind. Between all of us, once we put all that knowledge together, we know most of what you know, and can pretty well guess the rest."

Admiral Hardy readily recognized the double meaning to those words. *Don't try to screw us over, because we'll know, and what the inevitable result of that would be to you, you know.*

"Point taken. Anyway, the SSN 774 Virginia comes into Mobile for inspection, resupply, and minor repairs on a semi-regular basis, and its commander, first officer and a large number of the crewmen are ours. It's the first Virginia Class boat ever built, complete with a compliment of vertical launch missile tubes. Due to the increasing tensions with China, ten of those are currently tipped with nukes."

"Are they carrying single or multiple warheads these days?" Edge asked.

"Multiple."

"Good; we can target more points than they can provide cover for that way, and they'll know it. You intend to take it while it's in dock?"

"Yes; I've timed it for right after it's been resupplied; we can have it back out to sea within an hour."

"That's not good enough."

The simple, blunt tone as well as the words, made Hardy blink in shock, but Edge continued.

"Plants can turn Mobile into a crater in an hour, and I have no doubt he would do that very thing. I know I would do it if the situation was reversed and we were facing a nuclear-armed enemy with its entire threat gathered in a single spot. I'm not a believer in putting all our eggs in one basket, and that's just what this is. If the US launches a nuclear strike against a Southern city when we lack the means to retaliate in kind, our people will panic. They'll be so scared the enemy will keep doing it that our support will evaporate, and the Cause will be dead within a month. We need another sub, a second source of nuclear weapons, as an insurance policy to let Plants know that, even if he takes out one, the other will do the same to him."

"But it could be years before two subs dock at the same time!"

"I'm not talking about docking. We'll take the Virginia at the dock, but wouldn't it be just as easy and a lot more secure to simultaneously take a second one at sea, since you told me you already have your people on board?"

"John, you know we can't take one at sea. That's mutiny and piracy under international law!"

His sentence was interrupted when Edge snorted a rare obscenity more powerful than anyone who knew

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him had ever heard come from his mouth, and followed it by blowing out his breath in disgust as he glared at Admiral Hardy like he was an idiot.

"Do you think we give a damn about international law right now?"

Hardy blinked once, then tried again.

"You have to care. The ramifications are – "

"The ramifications are this!" the Field Marshal cut him off, jabbing his index finger hard against the table with an audible thump for emphasis, "We're looking at the very real possibility of starting a nuclear exchange in which tens of millions on both sides may die, after which China picks up the pieces. In fact, if we don't do anything, millions will still die, and China *still* picks up the pieces. Compared to that, I'm not too concerned about a bunch of foreign sensibilities. We are rebels against a country that flaunts international law constantly, and if that's what it takes to beat them, then we'll do it and worry about the ramifications later."

"Look, there will be no nuclear exchange! The Plants Administration will cave at this threat!"

"And if they don't?" His voice was quiet and even.

"It won't come to that!"

Edge slowly shook his head.

"I really hope not. You need to understand something, Fred; this will not be a threat. This isn't poker, and I'm not bluffing – not in the least.

"Things can't continue like they are. We're stretched to the breaking point right now, and it's not going to get any better. More and more of our people are dying by the day from hunger and disease, as well as the war. That's how bad it is now, and we can't afford to let it get worse, for our people's sake as well as our own and that of the Cause.

"And if we keep going like we are, eventually either both sides will get weak enough that China will invade, or the Feds will finally do us in, but either way, the odds are we're eventually going to lose. That's a given, because the US is too powerful, and if we lose either way, we die, both individually and as a people. I'm not going to let that happen, no matter what it takes. I'm willing to take this risk, because I'm not going to watch Dixie die, not on my watch! If we go down," Edge added, "I'll be damned if we do it alone! This will be with the Sampson option. Following the Second Revolution, General Lee lamented that, if he had only have known what the Yankees meant to make of their victory, he would never have surrendered, but would rather have died on the battlefield with his men, sword in hand. Well, I know what they intend if they win, so I don't have either his excuse or his scruples. We'll take our enemies down with us, and the Chinese can inherit a radioactive hell hole. We might still die, but by God, at least we'll be remembered!"

Hardy opened his mouth to say something, anything, but was silenced when Edge leveled his finger at him like a pistol.

"No more arguments. And do yourself a favor; don't even think about backing out now! It won't work. You're my friend, but if you buck me on this, I'll not only give everything you've done to the Feds, but I'll see to it every one of our men, and every one of your men on the Secret Team and Red Four, know exactly what you did, and how you betrayed us all. One way or another, you'll be dead within a month, and I can just about guarantee it won't be pretty. This war has reached the point that there is no, 'we'll go this far and no farther;' those days are long behind us, if they ever existed at all. We are at the point where we have no choice but to win, whatever it takes; if it means going farther than the enemy is willing to go, that's exactly what we'll do. You're in this all the way to the end, whichever way it turns out. Do I make myself clear?"

Admiral Fred Hardy had the distinctly uncomfortable experience of feeling his head nodding agreement of its own accord.

I haven't felt like this since I was a freshman at the Academy!

"Good," the Field Marshal continued, "We need another sub, one with the biggest compliment of nuclear weapons we can get our hands on. That's your department; coordinate the two takeovers."

"All right," was all he could say. "It's just that this isn't at all what I expected when I signed on with this thing."

Edge shook his head as he stood. "That's the story of our lives, isn't it? Can any one of us honestly say we expected any of the stuff that's happened since they took down that flag in Columbia? Lord, that seems like a

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lifetime ago."

Hardy made no move to get up.

"There is one more thing you need to know; North Carolina can't be involved in any of the planning, or have any inkling what we're up to."

Instantly the icy blue eyes were locked on his.

"Why?"

"You've got a traitor up there."

"We figured that out for ourselves," Edge told him dryly, "After the attack that almost killed Frank and the homing device somebody put on Suggs' car, it was pretty obvious. I don't suppose you can tell me who it is?"

Hardy spread his hands helplessly.

"I wish I could, but I don't know."

The Field Marshal's features darkened as he sat back down, slowly and deliberately.

"Give me what you do know."

Hardy started slightly at the tone of his old friend's voice; it had grown even harder, until it held all the tenderness of a sharp knife slicing through skin. It went beyond even an order that he expected to be obeyed, and into the realm of something like a force of nature that would be obeyed, one way or another. As an admiral, he wasn't used to being spoken to like that, yet the answer instantly came pouring out before he realized it. He had every intention of giving the Field Marshal whatever information he desired, but it seemed as if the choice was no longer his, that he had lost the ability to say "no" if he so desired. On an instinctual level, he was also as frightened as if he had found himself somehow locked in a cage with a full-grown tiger as he felt the hatred and fury pouring from Jonathon Edge like heat from a furnace, and he could no longer force himself to meet the Confederate's eyes when he answered.

Passing a flash drive to his host, who pocketed it without looking at it, he said, "We know he reports only to the NSA Head, John Ostrovsky, and he's too high up, too well-connected, and too experienced for us to access his material directly. We do have our own sympathizers on the inside, in the CIA and NSA, however, and they have managed to covertly uncover some peripheral information, some of it confirmed, some probable, some just rumor.

"On the day your people were attacked on that mountaintop in North Carolina, we know that the sum of ten million dollars was transferred from an NSA account into an offshore account in Switzerland. A couple of weeks after it was discovered that Frank Gore was still alive, the entire sum was transferred back. Then, a month before the most recent incident, one million was transferred into the same Swiss account.

"The account has been accessed on various occasions from numerous ISP address in North Carolina, although he's too careful – and has too much NSA cover – for us to figure out exactly who's doing it.

"Whoever he is, he's close to the leadership up there, either as a high-ranking member of their cadre himself, or as someone like a secretary or aide, who could access secret information. Even though we don't know exactly what – what we do have is on that flash drive – we do know that a more or less regular stream of data has been going directly from there to Ostrovsky.

"That's all we've got; I hope you can figure it out from there, but I'm sure you understand why the Tarheels have to be kept at arms' length from this operation."

"I appreciate that," Edge said, "and believe me; we *will* find him!"

He paused then asked, "When can we meet with General Lannigan?"

"I'll set it up and contact you. We'd better give it a couple of weeks; he and I are friends, and if we both go moving around in the same area one right after the other, it might be noticed and raise suspicions. We can't afford that right now."

"Agreed, but we can't afford to wait too long either."

As they shook hands, Hardy just hoped they found their traitor soon, before he did irreparable damage.

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DAY 800

CHAPTER 19

"Sit down here with me, Sammie; we need to talk."

As she looked at her husband patting the battered seat of the sofa, indicating he wanted her beside him, her stomach began doing flip-flops. Not that she was afraid of Frank, never that, but rather afraid *for* him, afraid of what he was going to tell her. She knew from his tight-lipped expression that it was going to be something…*unpleasant*, which, during a revolution, meant dangerous. Especially considering he had been wearing that expression since returning from a covert meeting with Jonathon Edge more than two hours ago, this did not bode well at all. Still, she came and sat, and Frank looked away for a minute, gathering his thoughts.

"What is it, honey?" she finally brought herself to ask, unable to hold back anymore, and he slipped his arm protectively around her shoulders and pulled her close. Linda was in her arms, and she immediately began playing with her father's shirt buttons. He gently tickled her with his finger for a moment, then sighed and began to speak.

"I know you've told me you don't want to know any more than you have to, but you need to know at least the basics of what's going on. This war will be over in a few months." He paused, and took a deep breath before adding, "One way or another."

She swallowed hard, torn between hope and fear.

"How?"

Without going into too much detail, he told her that they had the opportunity to acquire a number of nuclear weapons to threaten the enemy with, and that they planned to use them to deliver an ultimatum.

After a moment, she asked the obvious, "So…what happens if they refuse?"

"We'll use them."

"Oh," was all she could think of to say for a few seconds, before forcing herself to ask, "And they'll launch theirs in return, won't they?"

"Yeah. No question."

Samantha knew very well what that would mean; the burning ruins of cities filled with millions of dead on each side, hordes of burned refugees, radiation-induced cancers for decades. Her body began shaking, and he pulled her closer. Swallowing hard and trying to force down the giant lump that suddenly appeared in her throat, she asked the only question she could think of.

"Is there any other way?"

"No," he told her, shaking his head, "Right now, Plants is trying to find the best way to use nuclear weapons against us. Most likely he'll repeat what Truman did to the Japanese; nuke a city or two in order to force us to surrender. All that's holding him back now is picking a target and fear of how China and Russia might react, but he'll eventually talk himself into it."

"My God…"

"Even if he doesn't take that option, we still have to do this unless we want to go on like we are now for years, maybe decades. The odds are stacked against us surviving that. The odds of survival with this plan are better – a lot better."

He didn't add, *and whatever happens, at least it will be over,* but he didn't have to. She understood; he was tired. She was tired of the whole thing too; they all were. Now it was time to put up or shut up, to gamble everything on a single roll of the dice.

"All right then." Her words came out as a wail, and he held her as she cried for a long, long time.

When she finally stopped, she whispered, "These few months might be all we have left together, mightn't they?"

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"Hey," he said, pulling her closer, "the odds are in our favor that the Feds will agree to a cease fire."

"But they might not, right?"

"It's possible, I know, but – "

"All right then. Since this might be it, I don't want to have any regrets. I want to spend every minute, every second I can with you and Linda until then, until whatever happens… happens. For that time, I want to be just a normal wife to you as much as I can, and I want you to be a normal husband, as much as your duties will allow." Shaking her head, she sobbed as the tears began flowing once more. "That's something I always wanted and could never have! I just want us to be a regular family, or at least pretend to be, for whatever time we've got left! Will you please do that for me?"

Reaching out with the index finger of his right hand, he brushed a strand of her blond hair back out of the way, then wiped away a tear and raised it to his lips.

"I'll do my best," he promised, and she kissed him.

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DAY 813

CHAPTER 20

Frank met with General Lannigan in a single story house in the suburbs not too far from Columbia. This time there were no elaborate charades as there had been with Edge and Hardy; this was more a case of hiding in plain sight. Lannigan brought a platoon of 82nd Airborne paratroopers for security while he *"met with a covert intelligence asset."* They formed the perimeter and unknowingly provided security for what their government would have undoubtedly called an act of high treason.

Frank wasn't overly worried about being betrayed by Lannigan; still, he hadn't survived this long by taking unnecessary chances either. For starters, he wasn't actually in the safe house, but in another house two back yards away, monitoring the situation before committing. For another, the 1st Columbia Irregulars, complete with snipers, surface-to-air and anti-armor weapons were scattered around the neighborhood in prearranged positions of concealment. When the three crack mortar teams bracketing the area from still farther out were added in, the 82 platoon was unknowingly surrounded, outmanned, outgunned, and ready to become instant statistics if anything should go wrong.

It didn't, and Frank entered the safe house through the basement, via a lumber-supported tunnel his men had dug in preparation for just such a need weeks before. Once he emerged inside and walked into the living room, Lannigan stood up from the upholstered chair he had been occupying for the past few minutes, saluted, and offered his hand. Frank returned the salute, and the two men shook hands.

"It's a pleasure to finally meet you, General Gore."

"You too, General," Frank said sincerely, "Your reputation precedes you."

Lannigan grinned. "If it didn't, I doubt we'd be having this meeting."

Frank laughed and the two sat down.

"Field Marshal Edge briefed me on what he and Admiral Hardy had discussed," Frank told him, "so I think I'm up to speed there. Now I need to know what you're proposing on your end."

"At the same time Edge and Hardy are working their magic, we need to solidify our grip on the land side by taking control of at least three Army bases: Forts A.P. Hill, Bragg, and Stewart."

Frank sat in silence for a moment before answering, his lips pursed and his tongue running over his teeth in thought.

"Why these three? Isn't Hill mainly a National Guard training facility these days?" In fact, the area around Hill and other places in Virginia and Maryland near Washington, DC had been pretty much left alone by the Confederates, for two reasons. First, because anything they might gain – no more than a few low-value detainees being released and whatever weapons they could carry away on their backs – had not been deemed worth the risk in that tightly-controlled area. Secondly, Frank and Edge had intentionally left numerous "islands" of safety for the Feds throughout Dixie, places where practically no CAP actions whatsoever were carried out, the reasoning being that, if they needed a propaganda coup at some future time, they could suddenly hit them and bust them wide open, without the complacent enemy ever expecting it.

"Training, yes, but not just the Guard" Lannigan verified with a nod, "All four branches of service use it, plus a few foreign allies. Because it's a training facility, it's lightly manned with permanent party, and that means it's easier to take. There's never been any action near there, and, frankly, the security of that base is shit, and always has been. The Administration and the Pentagon like to put on a little dog and pony show there, showing how safe it is to try to prove to the people that you all are not kicking our asses. Still that's not the primary reason, nor is the fact that there is quite a bit of armament there, some of it armor; but we'll get to that in a minute. The main reason we need A.P. Hill is the rattle factor."

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Frank's left eyebrow cocked upward like a question mark, emphasizing his curiosity.

"Rattle factor?"

"Yes. Here, I've got a map…"

Without thinking, Lannigan reached inside his fatigue jacket rather quickly, and he saw nothing but a blur when Frank moved. It took him a few seconds to realize that the Confederate had lunged forward out of his chair, grabbed the US General's right arm with his left hand and pinned it tightly against his chest, leaning on it with his weight, while Lannigan's fingers were still inside his jacket. Frank's right hand contained his old 1911 Colt .45, and was pressing its muzzle firmly against the exact center of the General's forehead, his finger on the trigger.

Seeing his own death in Frank Gore's cold eyes, Lannigan cursed himself for being such an idiot.

"It's in here, in my jacket pocket," he said lamely as he sat very still. Frank never changed expression.

"Bring it out…slowly."

Lannigan obeyed and withdrew the folded map while Frank maintained the dual controlling pressure of his hand on his wrist and his pistol between his eyes. Once he saw it was what the General claimed, he released his grip and holstered his pistol.

"Sorry."

"My fault," Lannigan assured him with all sincerity, even as he sighed inwardly with relief at the realization of just how close he had just come to dying.

I'm getting soft! I'm too used to dealing with politician soldiers, not the real thing. That's something I'm going to have to remember. I'd probably do well to remember that this guy is evidently as good as everybody says he is too; I've never seen anyone move that fast!

"Anyway," he continued, forcing his breathing back to normal while he unfolded the map before looking meaningfully at the sofa, "if we both sit here, it will be easier to show you."

Frank complied, parking himself beside Lannigan while his "guest" spread the map out on the coffee table and pointed a broad-nailed, thick finger at Virginia.

"Here's A.P. Hill, and here's DC."

"They're only about an hour apart," Frank told him, measuring the distance with his keen eyes, and Lannigan nodded his agreement.

"About that, depending on the traffic; that's the rattle factor. The powers that be in Washington will literally shit their pants when they find Confederate forces right on their doorstep. But look here, just thirty miles north of the Fort."

Following the pointing finger, the corners of Frank's mouth began turning up in a smile that would have looked right at home on a wolf that had just cornered a sheep.

"The Potomac River Bridge…You did say there was some armor at Hill, right?"

The General nodded, both pleased and more than a little surprised that the Southerner had grasped his plan so quickly.

"Park it on the bridge and the route is completely blocked. They can't launch artillery or air strikes without destroying the bridge itself, and besides which, you all still seem to have plenty of those Russian and Chinese SAMs; you could shoot down almost anything the Air Force could fly against you."

"Reinforce the armor with infantry," Frank added, "and put a few patrol boats in the river armed with ship killers, and we shut that down too, and make it tough for their only remaining military option – ground forces – to root us out of there. We'll own that whole section." He paused for a moment, thinking. "Of course, we'll plant charges on the bridge too, just in case we're pushed out, so we can bring the whole thing down when we leave. Nothing will be able to cross, and the wreckage will block the river for weeks." Nodding his approval, he added, "I understand. Now, what about Stewart?"

"Stewart is largely strategic; it's big, and has plenty of arms and supplies. It's also the biggest armor training facility east of the Mississippi, as well as the home of Hunter Army Airbase; take it, you take the tanks, APCs and helicopters with it. The main goal there should be securing the equipment and command structure; we can worry about the rest of the fort later. We've got a Colonel in the fort's command hierarchy, along with a small but solid contingent of sympathizers in the Rangers and 3rd Infantry, and scattered

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throughout other units there that will assist."

Frank eyeballed him for a second as he digested the information, and then nodded his satisfaction even while his subconscious busily sorted and sifted the data, seeking every advantage as part of a hard-learned survival instinct.

"Now to Fort Bragg," Lannigan said, getting the distinct feeling that Frank not only understood what he had said, but had already jumped ahead and figured out where he was going, "Bragg is both strategic and psychological. Strategically, it's in a great location and has an enormous quantity of armament and supplies, but more importantly, it has its own airstrip."

"We'll need to take Pope Air Force base that butts up against it too," Frank put in, and Lannigan nodded his agreement.

"Absolutely; we'll need the air power. While we won't get enough planes to make it overwhelming, if we get what's there in the air, we'll still be a force to be reckoned with in the east-central South, at least for a few hours, and that's all we need."

"And thus the paradigm of the war changes, from a guerrilla conflict to more conventional warfare."

"It has to."

"I know; to be honest, I'm glad to see it reaching this stage because it means we're closer to accomplishing our goals."

"I am too; historically, that means we have a real chance of winning in the foreseeable future.

"Now, back to Bragg. I mentioned the psychological factor. Imagine the impact of seeing the home base of the United States Special Forces, the very center of Special Operations for the entire country, being taken by a guerrilla force."

"The blow to enemy morale will be off the scale," Frank said, and then added, "Add to the international embarrassment of all the Spec-Ops people from other countries training there being temporarily detained by what President Plants described as 'a little ragtag band of criminals,' and what little international reputation the US still retains will be gone. Especially when we request that the ambassadors of those countries they belong to come and deal directly with us, in order to arrange for their well-treated soldiers to go back home with them; that's diplomatic recognition, which is another thing we desperately need. It puts the Confederate States of America front and center on the world stage, a much-needed step toward putting us back in our rightful place among the nations of the Earth. Besides, it will also put the US in an impossible position; they can't let these other countries deal with us for that very reason, but trying to stop them from doing so would be equally disastrous."

General Jim Lannigan was left slightly wide-eyed, having just become the latest victim of General Gore's increasingly well-known talent for taking any plan brought to him, instantly seizing not only the patterns, but also figuring the extended logical consequences, and improving and expanding it, usually far beyond what the original planner had conceived to be possible.

It's damned unnerving, is what it is!

"So," Frank asked, "what's the plan for each place, and what do we need to accomplish it?"

"Bragg and Pope we can take from the inside. I'm the Base Commander at Bragg, and we've got enough dissident Southern soldiers to do it and others who will simply obey any orders they're given, and, if you reinforce them, to hold it, at least until the Edge and Hardy do their thing. Stewart will be tougher; we have the people on the ground I mentioned, and they can take command of the primary area the same way as the others, but the Fort is spread out, as are the personnel. We can expect more fighting there than anywhere else. That's the only one I'm not reasonably certain we can take completely, although we should at least end up controlling part of it if you can provide the extra men to do so."

Frank shrugged.

"Lets take the parts of it we need, then, and can hold with what we have available."

Over the next two hours, Lannigan laid out the plans for the conquests of Hill and Stewart, with Hill being by far the simpler of the two. Bragg, on the other hand, which looked like the most difficult target of all, should, in theory, actually be the next easiest. When Frank asked him how he figured that, General Lannigan smiled and said, "Because I'm there, along with Red 4."

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There was only one fly in the ointment; the Rebels could capture the bases, but insuring they could hold them until the US capitulated was another matter. To that, they would need many more men than what they currently had available, even if they stripped every state down to the bare bones and could get move those thousands of men all the way across the South undetected, neither of which was a viable option.

Frank had hoped the war wouldn't come to the point that he would be forced to make the choice he was now faced with, but he was also a man who had never confused his hopes with cold, hard reality.

We'll do whatever we have to. I guess it's time our people start taking a more active part in the war for their own country.

"Don't worry about that end, General; I've got a plan to get the men."

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DAY 815

CHAPTER 21

General Order Number 417,
Confederate Army Provisional

To: All State Theater Commanders

Subject: Conscription

In order to address the shortage of manpower in our ranks, to give the citizens of the Confederate States of America the opportunity and privilege to assist in the struggle for their own independence, and to insure a high level of participation, discipline and training in the various state militia forces following independence, the following program of military conscription shall be instituted.

Recruiting officers shall be appointed by the Commanders of each State theater, and these officers, their designated agents, or any Confederate Army Provisional officer shall be granted the authority to compel any able-bodied Southern man between the ages of seventeen and forty-five to enter into his state's branch of the Confederate Army Provisional, where his immediate training and indoctrination will be made a top priority. All enlistments, voluntary or otherwise, shall last for the duration of the war.

All recruiting officers shall keep exact records, and submit them to the State Commander. The Commander shall be responsible for arranging the training of all recruits, and for seeing that any dependents of the said recruits have their basic material needs provided for, for the duration of their enlistment.

This order shall be effective immediately upon receipt.

Signed: Field Marshal Jonathon Edge
General Franklin Gore

"Why aren't you just doing this in the states where we'll need the men?" Sam asked, only to see Frank shake his head.

"We do that, the Feds will know what states we're up to something in. Besides, they're needed everywhere; regardless of what we do here, this war is bigger than us."

"Yeah, but this isn't going to make us too popular."

Frank looked squarely at his friend and mentor.

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"At this point, it no longer matters. Those who might willingly get involved already are, while the others will sit on the fence or on the side of the Feds until Hell freezes over. We're taking Lucky Charlie Carnes' advice: 'Grab them by the balls, and their hearts and minds will follow.' This will actually bring more of them to our side."

"How do you figure that?"

"Easy; half the people out there are locked into the 'support our troops right or wrong' mentality. They support the Feds more because their own sons, fathers, husbands, and brothers are fighting for them, rather than for actual patriotic reasons. While they won't like us taking them, as long as they're fighting for us, their friends and families will feel bound to support us…especially since we'll be insuring those same families have at least a minimal amount of food and shelter. Most people will talk a lot of patriotic crap, but they get real practical real quick when it comes to food on the table and the well-being of their own kin."

He paused, grinning tightly before going on.

"Besides, Edge is all for it, and asked me what the hell took us so long to think of it."

"Do you think we'll have much trouble with desertion?"

"I doubt it, since the Feds are torturing and usually executing any of us they catch; would you want to take that chance?"

"That leaves them no way out, doesn't it?"

"Other than victory, no, but then, that goes for all of us."

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DAY 817

CHAPTER 22

"Here's the way it's going to work," Charlie Carnes told the assembled South Carolina officers, "You have all been chosen to head the training companies for our new conscripts, and you will report directly to me. Each of you will have a sergeant and a corporal under you to assist, and you will have a roving political officer, as yet to be determined, who will either give or send you the subject of the daily pep-talk, which you will give like you mean it. Remember, these men aren't volunteers; they don't want to be here, so we've got to get their minds right. We need to convert them over to the Cause, give them pride in themselves for serving it, and direct their frustration and hatred toward the enemy while, at the same time, conditioning them to be scared too shitless of us to try and desert or rebel.

"That's going to require breaking them down, and building them up again the way we want them, disciplined and motivated, the same as in any other military. You're going to give them pure hell the first week or so, and then they'll be ready to learn.

"The actual training program will be primarily designed and carried out by our Spetsnaz, Afrikaner, and Serbian advisors, because, to be blunt, with the exception of you all, all of our own best men are tied up with operations elsewhere; this war won't take a break for us, and we're not about to stop kicking Federal ass while we wait for these boys to be ready. We can't spare anymore of our best people than the ones right here in this room. Remember this; while these advisors will be training your men, those men will remain under your command, and will remain your responsibility. There will doubtless be some culture clashes here, and you will be the buffer between our advisors and our conscripts; any brushfires they start, it will be up to you to put out before anything gets out of hand. You're Southerners, so you know better than any of our foreign friends what our people will put up with and what they won't. You will have to work with both sides on this.

"You are also primarily responsible for discipline. Now I'm not going to get shook up when a foreign advisor puts a boot up some trainee's ass, but it will go no farther than that; I won't allow it, and you won't allow it. Any discipline beyond that, be it extra duty or a firing squad, will be carried out by you. These other guys might be our friends, but they're not us, and we're damned sure not working for them. Our men have got to see that, and understand that they're fighting for Dixie, not Russia or whoever.

"I noticed some of you looking surprised when I said firing squad. Well, don't be, because that's exactly what I meant; it's not your first option, but it is your final option. We can afford no deserters, no sowing of dissension within the ranks, particularly at this stage of the game. Deserters and would-be mutineers may be shot at your discretion, but either way, you cannot under any circumstances let one get away; otherwise you compromise the security of your entire camp, the lives of all your other men and our advisors, and the continued assistance from the countries that supplied them." He shook his scarred head. "That's far too high a price to pay for a scalawag coward who would run away rather than fight for his own people. It's the same thing if you have a chronic malcontent or serious troublemaker; he must be stopped, and I expect you to stop him…by any means necessary."

Susie Miller was parked with Rayray Hayden once more, but not in the same place as last time; after their grisly discovery only months ago, she had no desire to even see the previous spot again, let alone let her boyfriend romance her there. Instead they were parked in another wooded area several miles away, but, as it turned out, still in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Susie had turned sixteen today, and she decided to celebrate by finally letting Rayray go all the way, and they were so engrossed in working up to it they didn't notice the Confederate patrol coming out of the woods until they surrounded their car. In fact, the first hint of anything wrong was when both the driver's and

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passenger's doors opened as one, and they found themselves facing heavily armed guerrillas in camo with painted faces.

"Sorry to interrupt," the patrol leader, the newly-promoted Second Lieutenant Arnold Daniels told Rayray as they scrambled for their clothes, "but I need to see your ID."

As soon as he fastened his pants, Rayray produced his driver's license and handed it over. Daniels looked at the birth date listed on the document and quickly did the math in his head, confirming that the boy had turned seventeen last month. He looked at Johnny and shook his head with a rueful smile.

God, I hate having to do this!

"Congratulations, Private Hayden; you just joined the Confederate Army Provisional. You'll need to come with us."

Rayray swallowed hard, feeling like he had a pumpkin lodged in his throat, and then looked back at Susie, sitting there with tears in her eyes.

I knew this was happening, but I never thought it would happen to me. Damn it! I was so close!

Suddenly he was struck with an idea.

"Look, Captain – "

"It's Lieutenant."

"Sorry; Lieutenant then." He moistened his lips, realizing how lame what he was about to say sounded. "Can I talk to you for a second?" Seeing Daniels nod, he leaned in close and continued, his voice barely a whisper. "Look, I'll volunteer; I promise I'll go willingly and do everything you say. But my girlfriend just turned sixteen today, and she's never…I've never…you know…and we were gonna…you know…"

Arnold thought about it for a few seconds, remembered his own youth, and then made a command decision.

It'd be one hell of a note for a boy to have to kill and maybe die before he even gets laid for the first time!

"I know, boy." Glancing at his watch while fighting a grin, the Confederate told him, "Give me your keys and your cellphones; we'll pull back in the woods. You've got thirty minutes; you'd best do whatever you're going to do."

Rayray was actually smiling when he handed over the items before jumping back in the car and slamming the door, and the whole patrol was chuckling when they faded back in the brush to give them a little privacy.

Thirty minutes later, after Daniels left the keys with Susie so she would have a way home, the couple said their final goodbyes, Susie shed a few tears and told him to be careful, and Rayray was as good as his word. He didn't try to run and he gave the patrol no trouble, except for making them laugh all the way back to their base because of his total inability to wipe the shit-eating grin off his face.

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DAY 845
CHAPTER 23

Samantha's stomach heaved as she hung her head over the toilet in the tiny latrine designated for the few women at headquarters. Victoria had happened to be in there washing her hands when the Information Officer came rushing in, and was now standing behind her, holding her friend's long blonde hair out of the way while she retched. Grimacing at the foul taste as she spat out the last of it, Samantha thought, *It feels like I've spent half this war puking for one reason or another.*

"Are you all right?"

Samantha nodded at the Russian's voice of concern, not trusting herself to speak just yet, lest still more of the contents of her stomach come spewing out, although, for the life of her, she didn't see how there could be anything left down there. Finally things seemed to settle down to a low roar, and she carefully straightened up.

"Yeah, I'm fine, thanks."

"You don't look to fine to me." The woman pressed the back of her hand to her forehead and frowned. "No fever, but this is the second day in a row you've thrown up."

"Third."

"That's even worse. You know what it probably is."

Shaking her head in denial of what she herself feared, Samantha said, "That can't be it; I'm still nursing," and Victoria snorted.

"My grandmother nursed all her babies too, and she had ten of them, most of them about a year apart."

Even though she knew the older woman was right, Samantha still shook her head again.

"I'm just missing Frank; he's been gone for days making sure the conscript training is going okay, and I'm all stressed out with worry and not sleeping well. I've probably caught a bug or something."

Victoria looked meaningfully at her belly and said, "You caught a bug all right, and Frank is the one who planted it right in there." Before Samantha could say anything else, Edge's fiancée pointed at the medicine cabinet: actually, a captured plywood footlocker turned on end and nailed to the wall with a cheap mirror glued to its front. Out of necessity and their inability to travel freely and use pharmacies or conventional medical services, most Rebel safe houses stocked almost as wide a variety of whatever goods they could beg, borrow, or steal as a small drugstore. "I saw some pregnancy test kits in there when I was getting an aspirin a few minutes ago. You need to find out."

Nodding her reluctant agreement, Samantha said, "All right, I'll check. I know I need to, but right now, with everything going on, I just…well, it's just easier to put it off, if you know what I mean."

"I know, but you still need to do it, so you can begin prenatal care." Shaking her head, she added, "I really envy you, Sammie. I never had any children of my own, and I've always regretted that."

"Why didn't you?"

Victoria shrugged.

"I don't know; at first, it was my career. I just didn't have time for a child. My marriage was a stormy one – to be honest, my husband turned out to be a brutal drunken ass – so we never quite got around to really trying, and then, after my divorce, I threw myself into my work. And now…Sammie, I'll tell you a secret, but you must promise never to tell *anyone*."

"I promise."

"I haven't been using any birth control since I got together with Jonathon. He hasn't asked and I haven't told. I…I would really love to have his baby. Still, at his age and mine, maybe it's not meant to be."

Taking her hand, Samantha softly said, "You're not old, Vika, and Edge is still a strong man; just keep trying, and I think it'll happen. I'll pray for you if you'd like."

With a smile, Victoria said, "Yes, I would like that very much, thank you." She briefly hugged her, then

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gave her a gentle push toward the cabinet. “Now, got get your test kit before you forget about it.”

I’m not likely to forget about that, Samantha said to herself as she crossed the room to the medicine cabinet. *Put it off because I’m afraid, maybe, but I won’t forget it. It’s been the first thing in my mind for the past three days now!*

Daily Training Report

The recruits seem to be coming along well; their daily political indoctrination has made as much of a change in their minds as the physical training has in their bodies. Most of them are over their resentment and have fully accepted their forced enlistment. In fact, many of them seem to be grateful for it, since they not only have enough to eat themselves, but their families aren’t doing without either. Maybe more importantly, we’ve given them an outlet for their anger and frustrations by giving them the chance to fight…

“You wouldn’t be so damned bossy if you didn’t outrank me!”

Rayray Hayden was frustrated. Corporal Rick Carmichael was the conscript’s platoon leader, and he had pushed them hard, far above and beyond what their foreign trainers demanded. He exercised them until they puked, ran them until they dropped, and made them repeat the thousand and one other things a Confederate guerrilla needed to know until Rayray wouldn’t be surprised if Carmichael ordered them to shit Confederate gray and issue them scissors to cut their turds to regulation size. It wouldn’t have been so bad if the non-com had been older, but Rayray knew the hippie-haired teenager couldn’t be more than a few months his senior, if that. These other guys might put up with his attitude, particularly since he did everything they did right alongside them and was better at it, but Rayray was damned if he was going to tolerate it a second longer. They were practicing fire and movement, and when Rick told him to get his ass down before their currently-imaginary enemy shot it off, Rayray had had enough, and told him what was on his mind.

The result was unnerving. Rick just stood there calmly regarding him with that weird, blue-eyed thousand yard stare for a few seconds, and it was all Rayray could do not to step back, as the rest of the platoon who had caught the exchange had already done, distancing themselves from him and his outburst. A niggling little voice in the back of his mind told him he had just screwed up royally.

Rick opened his mouth to speak, but was interrupted by a shouted, “What the hell did you just say, punk?!” Rayray swallowed hard and reflected that, since their company commander, Lieutenant Casey Graham was coming towards him at a fast walk with clenched fists and a furious look on his face, he probably should have kept his voice a little lower. Graham was a psycho; that was obvious to all of them, and the new conscripts lived in fear of him even before they had seen him summarily execute the lone deserter from their bunch a week ago, dropping him with a single rifle shot in the back at two hundred yards as the man fled across a soybean field. He then marched all the conscripts past the corpse to get a good look at it before making them dig the grave and bury it.

And now I’ve got his attention...oh shit! He’s pulling his pistol!

Casey was doing that very thing, but before he could say anything else, Rick actually stepped protectively between Rayray and the officer answered for him.

“Sir, this man was asking for a hand-to-hand combat lesson; he seems to have a…*misconception* he wants me to clear up. However, he was concerned, because he didn’t want to strike someone of higher rank. Do I have permission to remove my insignia long enough to…*help him out* a little here?”

Casey’s angry snarl slowly spread into a shark-like grin, showing his teeth while his eyes glittered in anticipation.

“By all means, Corporal; after all, you’re here to make soldiers out of them.

Rayray couldn’t believe it; Corporal Carmichael was actually going to fight him, and Graham was going to allow it. The teenage recruit was a big boy, with a couple of inches and thirty pounds on the somewhat wiry guerrilla, and he intended to rid himself of his frustrations by thoroughly kicking his ass.

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If he hadn't been so wrapped up in what he intended to do, he might have noticed that his intended target was unusually calm while he stripped off his shirt and passed it to the officer, or just how strong those deceptively slender muscles were, or that they were as defined as the strands of steel cables. Looking straight at Rayray, arms dangling relaxed at his sides, he asked, "Are you ready"

"Ye-" was all Rayray managed to get out of his mouth, his hands just beginning to rise, when Rick abruptly closed the distance, springing forward from his right leg. Before the recruit could realize what was happening, let alone before he could move, the fingertips of Rick's left hand flicked him across the eyes with a tear-jerking motion, making them involuntarily squeeze tightly closed. Almost by the time they shut, a right uppercut drove with great force and precision into his solar plexus, and it was if Rayray was a marionette and someone had just cut his strings; his breath abruptly left him and he doubled over and was already on his way down when another uppercut, this one from the palm heel of Rick's left hand, took him under the right side of the jaw with enough power to straighten him back up and then some, so he toppled backwards instead of forwards, hitting the ground spread-eagled on his back, his hard head bouncing off the harder red clay of the training field.

Rayray blinked, wondering why he was on the ground and why his vision was blurred. Straining to see, he was surprised to see two images of Rick bending over, hands braced on his knees, and looking down at him, until it all came back to him even as the pair of Corporals merged into one.

"Are we through now?" Rick asked conversationally, not even breathing hard, and Rayray tried to nod, only to have it turn into a wince from the pain that seemed to be all over.

"Yeah, Corporal, we're through." It hurt him to have to say that, but there was no question about the statement's accuracy. He'd had all he wanted.

"Good," Rick said, and offered a hand. Rayray took it and allowed himself to be pulled to his feet, and then steadied with an arm around his shoulders until he stopped weaving.

"You okay?"

"Yeah…thanks."

Rick nodded curtly, then turned to the others.

"The rest of you all, take Private Hayden over to the medic and leave him to get him checked out, and then take ten. We'll start hand-to-hand combat training afterwards."

"Looks like somebody just got their first lesson," one of the older conscripts quipped in a low, chuckling voice before adding to Rayray, "Come on, Jack Dempsey; let's go see the nurse."

As soon as they turned to leave, Casey slapped Rick hard on the back.

"Hell of a good job, Kid! Hell of a job!"

Rick grinned and thanked him. Coming from his commander and mentor, that meant a lot.

Colonel Watis Suggs, commander of the North Carolina Theater, stepped out of the darkness and into the South Carolina slaughter house. It was after hours, and the place and all its gleaming stainless steel equipment were scrupulously clean, but the smell of blood still hung thick in the air, evidently embedded in the cinderblock building's very walls.

Watis had no real idea where the place was located. A squad of Irregulars had picked him up at the border after he left his car and walked several miles through the woods, and then they had brought him here in the back of a windowless van. They must have taken a roundabout route, because the trip seemed to take forever. They had even committed the indignity of running an electronics scanner over him first, but, after what happened last time, he couldn't blame them.

This whole situation is damned humiliating, is what it is!

Then, entering into the main slaughtering area of the abattoir, Watis saw Frank Gore. The General was squatting, looking over something lying on the floor, and the Colonel immediately realized that the permeated walls were not the only source of the blood odor.

Frank stood and looked levelly at Suggs, his voice carefully controlled, and showing no emotion. Pointing at the object he had been examining, he said, "You were followed."

"Shit!" the North Carolinian exclaimed with great feeling as he looked at the dead man lying face-up on the

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concrete floor. The nude body was that of a slight but muscular White man, a bit on the short side. It had been stripped and washed down – there were still pink droplets of mixed water and blood gathered on the floor drain – and the upper right side of the torso and neck were spotted with the tell-tale holes of double-00 buckshot. Looking at the indeterminate colored hair, the slightly buck teeth in the open mouth, and the glassy blue eyes, Watis recognized him immediately. "That's Clyde Meredith!"

"You know him then?"

"Hell yes, I know him! He's the corporal for fourth platoon in A company."

"He *was* the corporal," Frank said, putting his emphasis on the second word, "and he was tracking you. He pulled in less than ten minutes after you parked your car; they had another bug on it."

"No way! I went over that car with a fine-toothed comb before I left!"

"Did you look *inside* the gas tank?" the General asked, "That's where they put it, in a waterproof housing. My men found it with a scanner when they backtracked and checked it out after they caught him." Nodding toward the stiff corpse, he added, "He was good in the woods; he got to within three hundred yards of you and stayed right behind you, all the way, and, meanwhile, my people were shadowing both of you. He tried to make a cell phone call the minute you left in the van, and the Irregulars took him down in order to stop him. They tried to get him to surrender, but…" Frank shrugged. "He went for his rifle and one of them cut him down with a shotgun from less than twenty yards away. He only lasted a few minutes after that; they tried to question him, but he was pretty much beyond talking."

Watis was not a man subject to much in the way of fear, but he wasn't stupid either. He knew from what Frank said that he had men stationed where Watis was supposed to park, and they had watched him the whole way; he also knew what that meant. Realizing the knife edge-thin balance his life hung in at that moment, he said, "Look, Frank, I had no idea he was back there."

Frank waved his denial away.

"I know that now; otherwise, you'd be lying right here with this son of a bitch. After what happened on that mountain, and what happened the last time you came down here, I had to be sure, and now I am. My men said it was obvious you didn't know he was behind you, and equally obvious he was trying his best to keep you from finding out. That cell phone had a GPS chip; they were undoubtedly following him through that, and his job was to call when he finally followed you to me. Once that happened when I figure the Feds would have picked up the van with satellite imagery, followed it here that way, and probably put a smart bomb right on top of us. Fortunately – for us – we found him first, and dealt with the immediate problem. Unfortunately, that's just the tip of the iceberg."

"You think there are more of them than just him?"

"I don't think it; I *know* it."

As if in answer, Lieutenant Doug Long moved out of the shadows, carrying a Mossberg 500 combat shotgun with a night vision sight in one hand and a cell phone in the other.

"For you, General."

Frank held the phone to his ear and listened for a moment, then thanked whoever was on the other end of it before handing it back to Long, who faded back as silently as he had come.

Watis motioned with his head in the direction he had gone.

"I noticed the shotgun. Is he the one that took out Meredith?"

Frank nodded.

"Yeah; he's one of the best in the woods I've got, other than Steiner. By the way, that was intelligence. I was right; he's not the only one, or even the main one. He was just another little fish."

"You give me the names, and I can guaran-damn-tee you there won't be a' one of 'em still drawing breath come tomorrow morning!"

Frank threw his hands up in disgust.

"We don't have them – yet! We know there have been some money transfers from the Feds, however, and intelligence hacked his bank account and checked it, along with the numbers on his cell phone and the contents of his wallet and pockets. He's a low-level player, being paid mostly in dope."

"What?"

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Nodding at the corpse, Frank said, "He had enough Percocets and Oxycodone in his pocket to overdose a dozen people. He was a pill head, a pain killer addict, and a pretty hardcore one, from the looks of that pharmacy he was carrying around. My guess is that he was working for someone in your organization in exchange for drugs and maybe a little money too, something like that."

Watis was furious, not only about the betrayal and the dope, but also the fact that those drugs could have been put to far better use with his own wounded men. He had heard the screams of the men who, on occasion, were forced to have their wounds treated when none of the scarce anesthetics were available. Once he had even personally assisted Doctor Grissom, their veterinarian-turned combat surgeon, by holding down a seventeen year-old boy while the doctor cut his mangled leg off halfway down the thigh with nothing to kill the pain but a big slug of moonshine. The boy had screamed until he had torn his vocal chords, and now talked only in hoarse whispers. Those cries still haunted Watis' dreams on a regular basis.

"I want those sons of bitches, Frank. *I want them!*"

"No more than I do, but you're in a better position to root them out." He jerked a thumb at the body. "Covertly check on every one of this guy's friends in the unit; search their belongings if you get a chance to do it unnoticed. We don't want to put them on alert."

"Agreed. What about him?"

Pointedly looking around, Frank said, "Mark him down as a deserter who'll never be found." He waved a hand in the general direction of the machinery for processing meat. "That's why we brought him here to the slaughterhouse; what better place to dispose of a body?"

While the normally unflappable Colonel blanched just a little at that, he couldn't deny the idea's good sense. Meanwhile, Frank kept going.

"All right; who do you have that you can trust; I mean *absolutely* trust?"

Watis scratched furiously at his bushy beard in thought. At one time, he would have said everybody in his unit. Then came the mountain top ambush that had nearly killed both him and Frank, that deal with McEvoy, and the two that helped him escape, the bug on his car that had led the enemy to Frank's headquarters, and now this…

Damned few, that's who!

"I can think of two I'm absolutely sure of: Dee Grissom and Johnny Biscoe."

"I think those two have pretty much proven themselves," Frank agreed, "which brings us to the main issue I wanted to talk to you about.

"Watis, I don't mean any insult by this, but the fact remains that, until you get a handle on this thing, your entire state command is a major security risk: unacceptably so."

The Colonel instinctively bristled, then his shoulders slumped and he nodded; he couldn't argue with that assessment, especially not now.

"The thing is," Frank continued, "I'm going to need your men for a major operation in your state." Seeing Suggs' mouth start to open, he held up his hand. "No, I can't tell you what it is, not yet. Less than a handful of people know the specifics, and it's going to have to stay that way for the time being. It's need-to-know only, and right now, you don't need to know. When the time comes, I'll tell you.

"However, some parts of the plan will become obvious due to the nature of the training, and that can't be allowed to happen in a state force that has at least one direct line to the Feds." Watis' broad, scarred face was burning with shame, and Frank put his hand on the squat man's broad shoulder. "That's not your fault; it's just your project from now on, your number one priority. If you need any additional resources to accomplish that, you let me know, but you *find* them, be sure you've got the right ones, and then you do what you have to do. I don't care who they are and I don't care what you do to them; I'll back you one-hundred percent. Just bear in mind that I expect you to try to get whatever intelligence out of them you can first, and that you share *everything* you obtain in the process with me, without exception; fair enough?"

"Fair enough."

"All right, but with your security climate like it is now, they can't train for this project up there. I need you to put Grissom and Biscoe in charge of North Carolina's new recruits immediately, and then they're to move them down here in batches without telling them or anyone else where they're going; we can coordinate the

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movements with Colonel Carnes, and he will provide full cooperation."

Watis nodded. It went against the grain to have to move his troops to another state, and no doubt the more dedicated states-rights advocates in the Tarheel State were going to have a cow when they found out, but there was no denying the cold, hard logic of the move.

"Another thing," Frank went on, "when you choose which ones to send, I need the very best, particularly the most stable. They'll remain under direct command of your two officers, but they'll be trained by us and our foreign advisors, and be under the overall command of Colonel Carnes.

"Finally, while you're quietly investigating your men, please make note of their prior military experience, especially if they've been trained in armor, artillery, or either flight trained or experienced as ground crews."

Watis eyes widened when the possibilities hit him.

"What the hell are you up to?"

"Need-to-know, Watis, need-to-know. And, by the way, we'll have to arrange another route back for you. The boys decided to leave a little surprise for the enemy when they come to collect your car."

North Carolina Beacon

Four soldiers were killed and six more wounded today by an IED. They were checking out a report of an abandoned car in a rural area of Cleveland County near the South Carolina border when rebel terrorists remotely detonated a large quantity of explosives concealed inside it…

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DAY 846

CHAPTER 24

"Shh! You'll wake up Linda!"

In the darkness of their current safe house just outside of Greenville, Frank glanced at the sleeping baby in the homemade cradle beside their bed, and the corners of his mouth turned up.

"If she slept through all that ruckus we made in the past few minutes, I don't think us talking is likely to wake her up."

"Oh you!" Sammie lightly and playfully slapped him on the chest with the tips of her fingers. She knew very well what he was referring to. Her husband had finally gotten back to their headquarters less than two hours ago, and she was still slightly out of breath from their strenuous bout of lovemaking that had begun shortly afterward and ended only moments before. They were still tangled together, skin to skin, neither of them in any hurry to move. She giggled. "It's a wonder we didn't set off a Richter scale somewhere; I swear I felt the earth move."

"All in a day's work, ma'am."

The phrase gave her the opening to lead into the subject she had to talk about.

"Uh-huh. I think maybe you've been working too hard."

He pulled her closer and she snuggled into his arms.

"I happen to love my work."

Samantha let him hold her for a while before she spoke again. She really wasn't ready to tell him just now – she had only found out for sure while he was away – and hadn't quite gotten her own head around it yet, but she knew she had no reason not to. If nothing else, she had learned the hard way that it was best never to keep secrets from her husband that he had the right to know...that he needed to know.

"There's something I need to tell you."

"Hum?" he asked, and she realized he had almost dozed off before she interrupted him. She almost swore at herself, because she could have put it off until tomorrow...

Not that that would make any difference. Well, here goes.

"I'm pregnant again."

He was silent for a moment, not certain he had heard her right, then responded with, "Wow!"

Clearly hearing the enthusiasm in his voice, she thought, *Well, he's definitely wide awake now.*

"Wow is right. What are we going to do?"

She saw the flash of his grin in the darkness and felt him shrug before pulling her even closer and kissing her on the tip of her nose.

"I don't know; maybe make love again to celebrate?"

She was forced to smile at that one.

"That's how I got in this condition to begin with."

"Yeah, but at least you don't have to worry about getting pregnant now."

"I didn't think I *had* to now, what with Linda still nursing."

"Man plans and God laughs. How far along are you?"

She was silent for a moment.

"About a month, I think. You're not...upset are you?"

"No! Why would I be upset? After all," he said, curling his fingers and blowing on the nails before casually polishing them against his chest in an exaggerated show of pride, "I'm the one who put it in there."

"It's just that I know what kind of stress you're under..."

"Do you know how I deal with stress, Sammie?"

"Yes, I do; that's why I'm pregnant in the first place."

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"No! Well, yeah, sometimes, but that's only a little part of it." He nodded in the direction of the crib, where the soft, almost inaudible sounds of their daughter's regular breathing could be heard. "You and Linda are my island of stability; you're how I cope with all this craziness. You two are more than my family; you're the only thing in my life that's normal. When I look at you and our little girl, I can actually see what I'm fighting for. Yes, I believe in the politics of the Revolution and in the survival of the Southern Race, but those are too big to really grasp and be intimate with; they're almost abstracts in that they exist only in my head and my heart. There's nothing abstract about my family; you're real, you're concrete. You're something I know and love, something I can reach out and touch and actually hold in my hands. The war might be what I do – Hell, it's become a big part of who I am; I know that! – but you and Linda are who I *really* am, the last little bit of the old me, the real me, the human me. You're my life and more, and now I'm about to add to that. That's the last thing that would upset me." Leaning close, he kissed her forehead, then the tip of her nose again, then her lips. "I love you, and I'm proud that you're the mother of my child – er, children."

"Thank you," she whispered before adding, "I'm just so scared!"

It was Frank's turn to hesitate, and he did for just a second, because what he had to say was tearing at his heart like a poorly-set meat hook in a heavy side of beef, but the well-being of his wife and child were far more important than his own feelings.

"Sammie, I can have Vika make the arrangements to smuggle you and Linda out to Russia; you can stay with Tommy and Donna. I'll miss you both, but at least you'll be safe there until this thing is over."

"No."

"But – "

"No!" She repeated sharply before forcing herself to calm down a bit. "Like you said, we're family, and our place is with you, whatever happens. We're the ones who started this thing, and we'll see it through together, all the way to the end…whatever the end."

"All right then, but if you change your mind..."

"I won't." There was a tone of finality in her voice that he knew was beyond question, and he reached to stroke her hair.

"I'm proud of you."

"Thanks, but I'm still scared."

"I know honey, and so am I, but if everything goes right, this will all be over long before then, and, God willing, this one will be born in a hospital, not a barn like Linda was."

"That would be nice," she told him sincerely, even though as long as they had been hiding, fighting and running, what he was describing seemed as foreign as a half-remembered dream.

If it's a dream, then at least it's one I can sleep with.

Satisfied, she snuggled tighter still in the crook of his arm, kissed his chest before resting her head on it, and drifted off. Frank listened to her breath as it slowed and deepened, and, once he was sure his wife was unconscious, Frank ceased the steady hold he had been keeping on rhythm of his own breathing to make her think he had done the same, and then lay there with his eyes wide open, staring into the night.

He would never tell his wife, never let her know, but he was as desperately frightened as she was. In the past year, he had seen so much, and done so much, he knew exactly what was at stake, and, while he thought things would go right, prayed they would go right, he could see with full, bloody technicolor clarity the unwelcome vision in his mind's eye of what would happen to his wife and child if they went wrong.

I told her the truth; if this works out, everything will be all right. If it doesn't though...God help us...

In fact, God help us anyway!

He had a bad feeling he couldn't shake that something terrible beyond imagining was going to happen. Maybe it was just that things were going too good now, but he didn't think so; some part of him knew that something bad, something horrible was coming like a roaring black freight train somewhere down the line.

Pulling the woman he loved even closer, hearing her murmur softly in her sleep, and listening to her regular breathing and that of their child slumbering nearby, Frank lay there for hours in the still watches of the night, wide awake and praying for all he was worth.

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Not far away, in another bedroom just down the hall, Jonathon Edge and Victoria were awake as well, and lying in each other's arms. He had arrived with Frank, and did pretty much the same thing as his subordinate, only in his case, it was more desperate. He traveled much more extensively, and he and his fiancée got to see one another all too seldom to waste any unavoidable time on anything as mundane as sleep. Instead, after making love, they talked about their days and the events around them. Victoria had something to say, and figured now, when he was fully satisfied, her fiancé might be in a more receptive mood.

She wasn't going to ask him for any details of the plan; all she knew was that there was one, and it was big, big enough to end the war…if it worked. She also knew it was complicated, and that meant it was simple logic as to whom it was likely to affect the most.

"There's something you should know before your planning goes too far, John."

Something in Victoria's voice immediately caught his full attention and held it.

"What is it?"

Victoria frowned. She hadn't been told not to tell, true, but she still felt like she was breaking a trust.

Still, they're my friends, and he needs to know.

"Sammie is pregnant again."

Edge's hooded eyes shot wide open at that, and he was so startled his chest with Victoria's chin resting on it actually rose an inch or two from the bed before he realized it would do no good to get up. Letting himself sink back down, he blew out his breath in frustration.

"Wonderful!" he muttered sarcastically, "Why didn't Frank tell me?"

She shrugged her slender bare shoulders and traced his grizzled chest hair with a fingernail.

"For the same reason you wouldn't have told him, if your situations were reversed: pride. He doesn't want any special treatment."

"Does he actually think I'd hesitate for one minute to send him into harm's way because of that?"

She smiled tightly at him, just a little.

"Wouldn't you?"

He paused, trying to think of something to say, before seeming to deflate like an untied balloon.

"Yeah, I suppose I would."

"You really like him, don't you?"

Edge shook his head with a rare laugh.

"No. I don't really like him, and he doesn't like me, not conventionally, at any rate. There's been too much bad blood between us from the very earliest days of the Revolution; he and I almost killed each other on three different occasions; did you know that?"

Her head jerked up so quickly she felt a slight pain in her neck.

"What? You and Frank? When?"

"The first time was right at the beginning of the conflict; Sammie had been taken prisoner, and we didn't have the manpower to rescue her. Frank wouldn't take 'no' for an answer, disobeyed a direct order, and offered to 'shoot it out right here' if I got in his way. If it weren't for Sam, only one of us would have lived."

"My God…"

"The second time was a few months into the war. One of our Councilmen, Neil Larson, made each one of us believe the other was out to kill him."

"Why?"

Edge shrugged as best he could while lying on his back.

"The oldest reason in the world: power. He knew there was some friction between us. He wanted to take my place, and he thought that if I killed Frank, the hero of the movement, he could kill me with impunity, and everybody else would cheer him on. Of course, that was just his contingency plan. He planned on Frank being the one to come out on top. Larson figured he could take me, and it turned out he was right."

"Take you? Wait-wait-wait-wait!" she said, shaking her head in disbelief. "I'm missing something here. You mean you and Frank actually fought?"

"I'm ashamed to say there wasn't much of a fight to it. With all the tension between us due to Larson's machinations, Frank bucked me one too many times, and I had to put a stop to it. I decided to kill him...I

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actually tried to kill him."

"My God!" Victoria whispered again, "How...I mean, I know your abilities, John. How is it that he's still alive?"

"It turned out his abilities were better than mine." *That really hurts to have to admit! Damn it, I feel old!* "He figured out what I was planning and clued his men into what to watch for. I had barely closed my hand on my pistol when I realized I was looking down the barrel, not only of Frank's .45, but of the submachine guns of two of his men who seemed to appear out of nowhere. One of them was Tommy Richardson. I came to find out later that the rest of his unit had secured the entire area to prevent anyone else from interfering. He had anticipated me, and set up a preemptive ambush; I never had a chance."

"But..." She shuddered, hating to ask but not being able to stop herself, even though she was unable to force her voice into anything above a whisper when she said it. "Why didn't he kill you?"

Spreading his hands, Edge said, "His men wanted him to, but he was too good a man. He told me that I was the best chance of the Revolution succeeding – that I was literally the best man for the leader's job. He gave me my life back, even though it was a foolish thing for him to do; then, not long afterwards, he saved it from Neil Larson. Larson was going to assassinate me, and Frank knocked me out of the way, and ended up taking the bullet that was meant for me. Fortunately, it only hit him in the arm. Then Sammie shot Larson." He extended his index finger like a gun and made a loud click with his tongue to simulate the shot. "One round, right through the head. After that, Frank ordered his co-conspirator Herdman's execution."

"We heard in Russia that those two died, but we were led to believe it was in a Federal ambush."

"That's what everyone was led to believe; it wouldn't do anyone any good for people to know we had reached the point of having to kill each other in order to keep the movement together."

Victoria had a strong feeling that more – possibly many more – people than that had been killed 'in-house' in order to keep the movement together. That was sad, of course, but the former intelligence officer also knew, at least academically, it was generally a fact of life in any revolution, no matter who was fighting it. She wasn't overly concerned about that, but was instead mulling the way her fiancé had phrased something.

"You said, 'Frank ordered.' What do you mean? Weren't you there?"

"Oh, yeah, I was there. You see, Sammie got wind of the conspiracy and led an assault on the meeting with the 1st Columbia Irregulars – the original company, before they were almost wiped out in North Carolina. The thing is, she didn't know whether it was Larson or me that was going to try to kill Frank, and she didn't give a damn. She entered that room with the intention of killing the first one of us who appeared to be a threat; there is no question in my mind that she would have shot everybody there if she'd felt that's what it would take to keep her husband safe. Fortunately, while Frank and I were arguing and about to throw down on each other, Neil Larson made the first move. Sammie shot him, and then the next thing the Council knew, the Irregulars had taken the safe house, and I was looking down the barrels of their weapons once again." He paused, swallowing hard, just once. "This time, Sam was holding one of them, and Tommy and Billy were right there with him."

"Sam!" She was aghast; she knew he and John were best friends, and this was something she could never have imagined. "But..."

Edge spread his hands helplessly.

"Sam is friends with both Frank and I, and he loves Sammie like she was his own daughter, but his loyalty is to the Revolution first, and that's how it should be. He felt I was screwing up by targeting Frank, and, I'm ashamed to admit, he was right. They had the entire Council under their guns, and passed command to Frank."

Stopping for a moment, he shook his head, still in disbelief after all this time.

"Frank told me, along with the rest of the Council, how things were going to be, and that we'd better get our act together. Then, after killing Herdman, he passed command back to me, saluted me, and passed out in the floor from his wound."

Victoria lay there for a moment in stunned silence, considering what had been said.

"I love you, John, so forgive me for saying this, but I've studied your personality extensively; it's not like you to just let something like that go. I'm glad you did, because I love Frank and Sammie very much, and Sam and the rest as well, but I don't understand."

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Edge sighed. “I let it go for two reasons; the first and most important one is that they were absolutely right, and I was wrong. They were putting the movement first, and I was putting me first. The second one, as selfish as this may sound, was what they did for me. Frank demonstrated very clearly that not everybody was out to get me, which was something I’d believed for a long, long time. He taught me that there were people I could trust, and that I could delegate authority to them without being afraid of being stabbed in the back. You don’t know what that’s worth, finding someone you can trust implicitly.

“No, his personality and mine don’t mesh well, and we don’t socialize much, but we’re still like family, and I owe him, as well as his wife. You don’t have to like someone in order to love them, to look at them like a brother, or maybe even like a son.” Gazing squarely into Victoria’s blue eyes with his own, he added, “That’s why I’m not sending him to lead this final operation, not now, not knowing about Sammie’s condition; both of them have suffered enough for the Cause. Instead, I’ll switch places with him; I’ll hold him in reserve and lead the attack myself.”

Victoria felt as if her stomach had just dropped out of her. She slumped slightly forward like she had just been kicked, and she literally felt nauseous. A part of her – a loud and very sincere part of her subconscious – suddenly wished to God she had never mentioned Samantha’s pregnancy.

I didn’t come halfway around the world to lose this man!

“No! I didn’t mean for you to go!”

“The people coming over from the other side need someone high-profile on the ground with them in order to assure them of our total commitment, and we need someone there to insure they’re not playing their own game, so it’s got to be either him or me,” he told her with another shrug that said a little too clearly he was stating the obvious, “And he’s got a wife and baby, and another one on the way.”

“And you’ve got a fiancée who loves you!”

“Yes, and I love you too, but, like you said, you’ve studied me, and you know what I am and what I do. You knew what I was when you took up with me.”

“Yes, but...” Her voice trailed off when she saw the tight smile of anticipation tugging at the corners of his mouth in the near-darkness, an exhilarated, exultant expression he was fighting but unable to completely suppress. She came to an abrupt epiphany. “This is your excuse, isn’t it? You’re actually looking forward to this! You *want* this!”

He started to say ‘no,’ but he wasn’t going to lie to her.

“Yeah,” he admitted, “I reckon maybe I do.”

“Why?”

Gesturing towards his gray hair, he said, “Vika, I’m almost sixty-two years-old, and I’ve been a warrior for most of my life. Once this attack is complete, this war will be over, one way or another.”

“You want another adventure!” she accused, and he shrugged and nodded.

“Guilty as charged.” Seeing the angry hurt in her eyes, he tried to explain. “Look, I’m getting old, and this will be my – ”

“No!” she shrieked, cutting him off by slamming her palm over his mouth with enough desperate, if unintentional force to drive the back of his head deeper into the pillow and press his lips painfully against his teeth, and she kept them tightly clamped there. “No, Jonathon, you *will not* say ‘last chance!’ I know what tends to happen when men go off on one *last* anything; they tend not to come back! I know you well enough to realize I can’t stop you from going, no matter what I say, but you *will not say that*, not if you love me!”

Edge gently reached up, took her wrist, and moved her hand away from his face, and kissed her palm, leaving the bloody print of his mouth behind.

“Then I won’t say it.”

He didn’t; neither of them said much of anything else for quite a while, as Victoria laid her head on his chest and cried like her heart would break.

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DAY 847

CHAPTER 25

"I'm the one who should be going," Frank told him, unable to keep his surprise out of his voice at Edge's decision, "You're the leader of this thing."

"That's why I'm going; sometimes a leader has to be out in front in order to get people to follow him."

"But…"

"It's my decision; like you said, I'm the leader here."

Frank blew out his breath in frustration; he had no argument that would top rank.

"All right, have it your own way. What do you want me to do while you're off having all the fun?"

Edge grinned tightly, knowing the younger man's words were truer ones than he knew.

I am really looking forward to this! I know I might die, but I want to get out in the field at least one more time. Besides, if we win, it'll look good when I run for President of the Confederacy.

"You're going to be in charge. You're going to ground, right here at South Carolina Headquarters; you, Sammie, Mike, Colonel Carnes, and half your Irregulars for security. I need you to split up the rest of your men, along with half your state's entire force, with part going to Georgia to reinforce their attack on Stewart, the other half to Bragg to back up the Tarheels. They can supervise our conscripts they've been training, and, in addition to those states' militia, they'll be backed up with both regular and conscript elements of Alabama, Florida, Tennessee, and the Eastern Cherokee forces. They will be under direct command of the Georgia and North Carolina Colonels, who will be directly under your command." He hastened to add that last when he saw Frank's gray eyes hardening even more than usual and his mouth already starting to open in protest. The First South Carolina Irregulars were more to him than simply the Palmetto State's most elite soldiers; he considered them family. Since most of the original unit had died to save him, he was almost pathologically reluctant to let them out of his sight, especially under anyone else's control but his own, even when he knew it had to be done, like now.

"Okay. What about A.P. Hill? Is your buddy, Wild Bill Joyce, running that one?"

"Yes, with the Old Dominion guerrillas, backed up with elements from West Virginia, Kentucky and Maryland."

"And you?"

Edge fought a grin. Frank was like a sponge, looking for all the knowledge he could absorb. And the Field Marshal was more than willing to give it to him, because the more his General knew, the more likely they would be to win.

"My main crew will be Secret Team sympathizers – SEALS and other personnel both – backed up by ex-military people from Alabama and Louisiana, as well as our Special Operations groups from those states."

Frank considered briefly and nodded. "What else?"

"You're going to be more than just reserve if something happens to me. You are going to be the nerve center of the Confederacy throughout this mission; everything has to happen simultaneously, for all practical purposes, and nothing can be allowed to interfere with any part of it. Through Mike, you'll be in touch with every colonel in every state. I want them to have their troops on full alert, ready to move and create a distraction should the need arise, but also to keep the peace when this works."

Frank nodded once more, but there was no mistaking what he was thinking.

"And if it doesn't work?"

Edge nodded his head meaningfully at the younger man. "If it doesn't, if we fail in the mission, or if we succeed but end up having to launch, presuming you survive the nuclear aftermath, it'll be all be up to you then; this Revolution and everything we've fought for will be yours. Use it wisely."

Frank snorted. "No pressure, huh?" and Edge gave him a tight smile.

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“No, no pressure.”

Even faced with the possibility of overall command, not to mention the very real chance of nuclear war, Frank refused to worry about it, as it was beyond his control. With the Calvinistic fatalism that had served so many of his ancestors well on the battle field, he knew the final consequences of what they were about to attempt were in the hands of the Almighty. All that was left for him was to prepare himself to do his part, his duty, and he would do it, come what may.

When he thought of his struggling country and of his family, though, he also knew it wouldn’t stop him from praying.

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DAY 915
CHAPTER 26

Mobile, Alabama

"Are you ready?"

Edge grinned tightly at Hardy.

"What do you think?"

The two men in admirals' uniforms began walking from their car towards the docked submarine, followed by their mixed entourage of Southern-sympathizing Navy personnel with a sprinkling of Louisiana and Alabama guerrillas, cleaned up and wearing the same uniforms, and traveling in the same convoy that brought Edge and Hardy. The Admiral shook his head.

"Stupid question as far as you're concerned, I guess. It's just like old days on the Teams; you *want* this! I think you live for this shit."

Absently returning the salutes of the sailors as they walked briskly past, Edge gave an almost infinitesimal shrug.

"Sometimes I think I do too," he admitted, "I never feel more alive than when I'm out on the edge, riding the sharp end; I crave it like an alcoholic needs a drink, sometimes." Shaking his head ruefully, he added, "It's a damned shame we have to get old."

Hardy laughed without humor.

"We won't have to worry about getting old if this screws up."

"Neither will a lot of other people."

"That's a mighty cold comfort!"

"We've all got to die from something."

Hardy had to turn his voice down as they neared the group of officers waiting for them, but he couldn't help but let the words quietly slip from the corner of his mouth.

"Sometimes, I really don't like you!"

Edge grinned and pressed the auto-dial button on his cell phone. "I have arrived," was all he said, letting the others know he was moving in, and to commence their own operations.

Immediate After Action Report

The boat and the missiles are secure and under our control. We have 2 dead and 7 wounded, plus at least 14 enemy dead and an unknown number of wounded resulting from the combination of the initial takeover and the repelling of an impromptu boarding party. Continue the operations…

Fort A.P. Hill, Virginia

Tyrone James wasn't a complete idiot; he knew his job was risky. Being an armed civilian guarding the front gate of 'The Hill' during a time of revolution had its risks. Still, the Rebels had never been active in the vicinity, this close to DC, and if they got that way, the security guard only had to press the alarm button to bring a company of MPs running, half of whom were always on duty just in case that scenario should arise. The civilian security was there because it was close to the Capital, and it allowed the Army to put on a little dog and pony show to reassure John Q. Public as to how quiet and under control everything in the area was. Besides, while Tyrone wasn't an idiot, he was notoriously lazy, and this was a job where you got paid for

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doing very little beyond sitting on your ass. His duties consisted of checking people's IDs when they went inside the Fort, and, since the base was a training facility manned by a virtual skeleton crew of regular personnel, he knew most of them by sight, and that usually entailed just a wave.

Things would pick up this weekend, he knew, because a battalion of National Guardsmen was due in for training, but for now, it was just permanent party and the civilian vendors who served them.

Speaking of vendors…

Tyrone looked up at the sound of the oncoming truck rolling up to his guard shack on US 301, the highway that ran through the base. He subconsciously verified that it was from Maritime Foods, a multi-state corporation with an office in Virginia, who had the contract for every military installation in the state. The eighteen-wheeler slowed, coming to a stop beside his window, and Tyrone looked up at a stranger's face looking back at him.

"Hey, man," the driver, a broad-faced, friendly-looking White man in his forties, called out, "you must be Tyrone."

"That's me. Where's Freddy?"

"He slipped in a puddle of oil and fell in the garage this morning; threw his back out. I'll be filling in for him for the next week or two."

Tyrone nodded sagely.

"That'll do it. I'll need to check your ID and your manifest, though."

"Okay." As he reached to comply, the driver, a former Marine and Richmond police officer shrugged mentally.

It was a toss-up, I reckon. I was hoping he'd wave us on through, but…

"Here you go." He held a clipboard full of paperwork out the window, and when Tyrone reached to take it, he raised the silenced .22 Ruger pistol he had concealed behind it, and put two subsonic rounds in the center of the guard's forehead. Tyrone dropped like a stone, and just as dead as one.

Immediately the second man in the cab was out and peeling out of his coveralls, revealing a uniform identical to Tyrone's. He and the driver quickly bundled the dead man into the passenger side of the cab, and the driver pulled out as the passenger took the guard's place. Even before the truck cleared the gate, he was already on his cell phone.

"The first part of the project is complete."

"*Gotcha."*

Within moments, nearly five hundred men – mainly Virginians, reinforced by still more Confederates from West Virginia, Kentucky and Maryland, began to move toward Fort Hill from the surrounding area, all in US Army uniforms, and all armed to the teeth, locked and loaded for bear. It was commitment time. Fifty of them rolled right through the front gates, packed into three previously captured US troop trucks, waved through by the new guard, who was expecting them. One truck stopped and turned sideways, blocking as much of the drive as possible as the men bailed out and set up a perimeter, using the truck to drag the nearby concrete barriers across the road before crouching behind them with assault rifles, light machine guns, and rocket launchers. The main gate to Fort A.P. Hill was now officially closed.

Meanwhile, the rig rolled up A.P. Hill Drive, finally coming to a stop at the loading dock, where the detail of soldiers assigned to assist with the unloading were lounging around, waiting. They didn't like the work, and bitched about it, as soldiers do, but their hearts weren't really in it. Here at 'The Hill' they had a cushy job and they knew it; at least it kept them out of the war.

That's why they were so surprised when they opened the trailer doors and found themselves looking down the muzzles of dozens of silenced weapons in the hands of Virginia Confederates in US Army uniforms.

"I wouldn't move, if I were you, boys," one of the guerrillas advised them, and they readily heeded his words. In less than two minutes, they were secured, bound, gagged, and stashed away. A squad of guerrillas was left to secure the area, and the rest moved toward the Fort's headquarters. They paused to wave at the trucks passing them, carrying their comrades to their own objectives: the armor parking area and the ammo dump.

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Debriefing

…As soon as the armor, artillery, and ammunition dump were secured, we moved two of the twelve captured Abrams Main Battle tanks to the front gate, and an Abrams and a Stryker to the rear after loading them with a full complement of ammo. The howitzers were separated and set up to cover the area in all directions.

While this was going on, our units moved inward, tightening the noose around the fort and sweeping up seventy enemy military personnel, along with four civilian bow hunters, who were on the property poaching deer. Only three enemy casualties occurred during this phase of the operation: a pair of Military Police enlisted personnel attempted to fire on one of the units, who preemptively returned fire, resulting in one dead and another wounded. Another soldier attempted to flee, ignored orders to halt, and was killed.

After the base was finally secured, we had taken into custody a total of two hundred-three enemy personnel, six Canadian SAS troops there for training, and a total of thirteen various enemy non-combatants, all of whom were temporarily housed in the cells set aside for civilian internees; the said hundred-ten internees being removed to the Fort's recreational facility, "The Downtime Zone," for their safety, feeding, comfort, and debriefing prior to processing for release.

While this was going on, four Abrams tanks, a pair of Bradley Fighting Vehicles, a 105mm howitzer, and a company of infantry support, along with the trucks to carry the ammunition and personnel, were dispatched to the north…

"Good grief! What the hell are they doing now?"

Phyllis Chandler shook her head absently at her husband's obviously rhetorical question. She had no more idea than he did, and, since it involved the military these days, she had serious doubts that they even knew what they were doing, besides blocking traffic.

Still, this was odd, even for the Army. A pair of Abrams tanks had crossed the bridge onto the Maryland side, where one of them had turned into the southbound lanes, straddling them, while the other did the same in the north lane. There they had stopped. There was no traffic behind them either, because she could see all the way to the other side of the river, where there were still more tanks and some kind of a big gun. Several soldiers on their side had jumped off the tanks they had been riding on the outside of, and were throwing up barricades and taking positions behind them, guns bristling. Still more soldiers were on the bridge, some lowering themselves beneath it with ropes and harnesses, and a couple of them climbing up the superstructure towards its highest point.

She sighed; it looked like they were going to be there for awhile.

"We might as well turn around and try another way."

"How?" Bill Chandler asked, throwing up his hands in frustration, "The guy behind me is right on my ass, and there's traffic backed up behind him for miles! There's nowhere to turn around; we're just stuck here!" Bringing both hands down, he slammed his palms hard against the steering wheel with a loud thud. "Damned Army! I swear I wish the Confederates would win!"

"Bill!" she hastily exclaimed, fluttering her own hands in instinctive panic, "Don't say things like that!"

"Why the hell not? You think that son of a bitch Plants has my car bugged too?" Shaking his head, he muttered, "A man can't even talk in his own damned car!"

"I just don't want us to get in trouble!"

He ignored her, glaring at the soldiers in front of them. "The CAP couldn't screw things up any worse than they are now. Look at this shit, Phyllis! Just look at it! We used to have a damned country! Land of the free and home of the brave, and it all went straight to Hell! What were we thinking that we ever let that happen?"

Resting her hand on her husband's arm, she quietly asked, "What could we have done to stop it?"

Suddenly she realized Bill wasn't listening, and her voice trailed off. Part of her was afraid he might have worked himself up into a stroke, but when she looked, all the blood seemed to have drained from his face, and he was staring out the windshield with his jaw hanging open.

"Bill? What is it?"

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He never answered, but opened his door, got out, and stood leaning one arm on the roof of their car, eyes fixed on the bridge. As she got out to see what he was looking at, she could hear dozens of other doors opening as well; no one could believe their windshields weren't lying to them by some strange refraction of the light, and they had to see with their own eyes the twenty-four foot long 3rd National Confederate Flag that the soldiers atop the bridge had just unfurled.

"Oh…my…God!"

Coastal Waters, Virginia Beach, Virginia

"Sir, this is highly irregular."

Captain Philip Montgomery, skipper of the Ohio Class Trident SSBN cruise missile submarine spared a glance at his first officer. The square-jawed but deceptively mild-looking Southerner felt sorry for the smaller, more angular Compton; the man didn't know he was arguing against his own life. His Captain didn't want to take it, and had argued vehemently with and finally refused a superior officer who had insisted it was the only way.

Phil Montgomery hailed from Biloxi, Mississippi; although born to a poor family, he was quite the ladies' man in his youth, so much so that one of his state's congressmen had secured an appointment at Annapolis Naval Academy for him, just to get him away from his daughter. It had worked out well for all concerned; she married a corporate lawyer, and Phil married the Navy and never looked back. A brilliant intellect got him through the academy while a willingness to think outside the box kept him advancing ahead of his fellows. He never forgot where he came from, however, although he always had to be careful never to let anyone know that his sympathies lay with his own people…outside a small circle of others who thought like he did.

Admiral Hardy had given him a problem, and had quietly worked behind the scenes, transferring as many like-minded souls as he dared onto the boat under Captain Montgomery's command without rousing suspicion, including a SEAL Team ostensibly there to prevent Southern sabotage or mutiny by people just like them. Still, out of the crew of two hundred, there were fifty-one men, either not Southerners, not reliable, or, like Compton, too solidly loyal to the United States to be considered for what they had planned. As that many men could not be kept reliably secured as prisoners in the confined environment of a nuclear submarine, that left only one option; despite its apparent necessity, Phil Montgomery wasn't about to take it.

"These men are warriors; more importantly, they're under my command, and they trust me!" he had told Hardy during a tense meeting in Norfolk, "I'll commit mutiny, but I will not murder these men in cold blood, nor will I set them adrift and leave them to die in mid-ocean. There has to another option!"

Even as the words left his lips, that option came to him, and Hardly approved it enthusiastically. As a bonus, the event would take place well within the twelve-mile limit that would make it a national matter, rather than on the high seas, where it would fall under international law as an act of piracy, something both men knew would save them a lot of grief later…if it worked. If it didn't, they wouldn't be alive to worry about it anyway, so it wouldn't matter.

Once underway, Phil had opened his sealed orders from Admiral Hardy, and now that he'd received the agreed-upon signal, he was going to carry them out.

"I know, Lieutenant; that's why I'm doing it. Boats can get monotonous, and men get complacent. The best way to break up that boredom and complacency and keep them on their toes from day one is to give them something unexpected. I intend to have the best crew in the Navy, and in order to do that, I have to surprise them with a new challenge once in a while.

"They won't be the only ones surprised, sir," Compton told him meaningfully, "We're within sight of Virginia Beach."

The Captain grinned.

"Think of it as public relations."

"What the hell is that dumbass doing?"

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Kathy Hollister idly glanced at her mumbling husband sitting beside her on the balcony of the luxury hotel, The Cavalier. They were facing the Atlantic, and, while she took in the sun, her retired admiral spouse took in the ocean through his powerful binoculars. Actually, he took in the ships, the military ones in particular, watching them like a hawk. Despite twenty years "on the beach," a sagging belly stretching his green polo shirt, and spindly legs sticking out of his white shorts, in David Hollister's mind he was still in command, and still had no patience with any Navy man who came up short of his standards, or did anything unusual, anything outside of routine.

"Did you say something, dear?"

"You're damned right I said something," he affirmed, his mumble rising to the level of a mutter, while never un-gluing his eyes from the binoculars, "Just look at that dumbass out there!"

Kathy let her eyes slide over the waves in the direction he indicated, all the while being unperturbed by his language; after thirty-three years of marriage to a sailor, she was used to it. As she finally spotted the large craft a few miles offshore, not much more than a smudge on the horizon to the naked eye at that distance, she knew whatever it was he was seeing must have really gotten his dander up. Her husband's thirty-five years in the Navy combined with his naturally irascible attitude had made him an astonishingly imaginative cusser with an enormous vocabulary of profanity, and the fact that he was upset enough to use the same swear word in two sentences that close together…

Whatever they're doing must be a real screw-up!

"I see the boat out there, but I can't tell what's going on."

I don't really care either, but I'd better humor him or he'll be impossible to live with.

Shoving the binoculars at her, he told her to look for herself.

Turning the focusing knob with a finger, she dialed away the blurriness and brought up the image of a submarine at the surface. She frowned at the figures moving around on it, launching what looked like life rafts.

"Are they…abandoning ship?"

"Hell no, they're not abandoning ship; they're not moving fast enough for that." He snatched the binoculars back and muttered some more as he readjusted the focus. "It looks like a drill."

"Oh. I thought the boats all did that."

"They do, but not here. Who in the hell is going to do a lifeboat drill right in the middle of the shipping lanes not five miles off the beach?" Suddenly he lunged to his feet, spilling his bourbon on the rocks unnoticed into his lap.

For the first time in the memory of anyone who knew him, Admiral David Hollister, US Navy (retired) was at a loss for words, profane or otherwise, as he watched the submarine get underway, sliding beneath the surface like a shark, leaving three rafts full of astonished men bobbing in its wake.

By the time the men made it to shore and their story was deciphered and passed up through every link in the chain of command until it reached someone with enough authority to do anything about it, all that could be definitely established was that the submarine, short fifty-one crew members, was somewhere in the Atlantic off the East Coast between Delaware and North Carolina. That the sub had been apparently seized by its own Captain was disturbing enough, but the fact that it had a full complement of one hundred fifty four Tomahawk cruise missiles on board, many of them tipped with nuclear warheads capable of targeting any point in North America, was downright frightening.

United States News Service

Besides sealing off the Governor Harry W. Nice Bridge and establishing a beachhead on Maryland soil, it has been reported that Forts A.P. Hill, Stewart, and Bragg have all fallen to the Confederate terrorist forces this afternoon, in at least some cases sabotaged from within, and the Mobile, Alabama Naval Station is in a state of siege. Other than reports of sporadic gunfire around the outlying areas of Fort Stewart and some scattered small unit clashes throughout the South, however, all seems quiet at the moment, but no one seems to know what is happening, or, if they do, they're not telling. Rumors are flying of masses of soldiers

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going over to the Rebels, and of a temporary truce.

Of immediate concern to Marylanders and those south of the DC beltway are the tanks and artillery on both sides of the Governor Nice Bridge; at least some of their guns appear to be pointed at the nearby local power plant. It's one of the few remaining in full operation, and its destruction could easily plunge the District of Columbia into darkness and chaos. Our military experts say there is no way to take out the tanks and artillery without destroying this vitally important bridge, and spotters confirm that the Confederates appear to have wired the bridge with explosives, ready to destroy it themselves if they are driven back. Meanwhile, still more terrorist infantry forces, along with additional artillery believed to have been captured at Fort Hill, have been pouring into the area between there and the bridge, effectively cutting off the strategically important Dahlgren Naval Proving Grounds, not to mention shutting down virtually all local traffic in the area. Even that section of the river has been closed, as numerous small boats bearing heavy weapons and flying Confederate flags have been spotted cruising the waters.

The situation is similar in the areas surrounding Fort Bragg and the neighboring Pope Air Force Base, and in parts of the Fort Stewart area, as the country holds its breath, waiting to see what President Plants will do…

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CHAPTER 27

Confederate Army Provisional Communiqué

To all sovereign countries whose personnel have been detained by the forces of the Confederate Army Provisional, excepting those of the United States:

Greetings.

We have no quarrel with you, nor with your personnel; they are not being held prisoner, but merely detained for their own safety, and will be returned to you at any time you desire. Please send an official diplomatic envoy at your earliest convenience with a request for their release, and they will immediately be given into your custody and provided safe conduct and transportation through our lines at our expense. Until that time, rest assured that they will be treated with full honor and respect as friends and guests of the Confederate States of America deserve.

General Franklin Gore, Confederate Army Provisional

Washington, DC

President Plants:

As of tonight, our forces are in possession and full control of one Ohio Class Trident submarine and one Virginia Class submarine complete with a full complement of 154 Tomahawk cruise missiles and twenty-four Trident II D-5 SLBM missiles respectively, for a combined explosive power almost 5000 times larger than the blast that destroyed Hiroshima in 1945.

We have targeted most of your major cities, as well as numerous military installations, and are ready, able, and willing to launch if you make it necessary. The catastrophic results of such an act, both in the loss of life and the neutering of United States military might in the face of expansionist powers like China are self-evident. We are also well aware of your probable response to such an attack, but we are determined to see our country free, or we will die in the attempt. Like Sampson, if we perish, rest assured, we will take our enemy down with us.

In order to prevent this bloodshed, you will order the entire military force in the South – Army, Navy, Air Force, Marines, and Coast Guard – to stand down immediately, and to return to their nearest base within twenty four hours. No military equipment is to be removed from Southern soil, be it small arms, planes, or battle ships; what is currently here, stays here. Further, no Southern prisoners held by you in any Federal military or civilian installation in the Southern States shall be moved out of them, nor shall any prisoners be executed. They will be held for exchange at a future date as yet to be determined.

We are not demanding that the United States surrender to us; we have no wish to upset the balance of power in the world anymore than necessary. We are demanding a ceasefire and a negotiated settlement on

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the aforementioned terms, which will allow both sides to save face.

This war will end within the next twenty four hours, one way or another; it can end in an honorable peace for both our peoples, or it can end in the destruction of both, but one way or another, it will end.

We await your answer at your earliest convenience. You have until nine pm tomorrow night.

Field Marshal Jonathon Edge, Supreme Commander, Confederate Army Provisional
General Franklin Gore, Commander, Confederate Army Provisional
Admiral Fredrick Hardy, Commander, Confederate Naval Forces
General James Lannigan, Commander, Confederate Ground Forces

The substance of the communiqué was bad enough, but seeing Hardy's and Lannigan's names on it, and realizing they had been working with the enemy all the time, drove President Plants' blood pressure right through the roof. He could actually hear the pulse pounding in his temples, and his head felt as if it might explode.

Those damned traitors! Who the hell do they think they are to threaten me?

The President was livid. By God, he would destroy those rebels! He would nuke their asses first! He would –

His train of thought abruptly derailed when his hotline number rang, and he gestured at his Chief of Staff, Goldstein, who had brought him the message.

"Get that!"

Goldstein obeyed, held the receiver to his ear for a moment, and started to speak, only to be cut off by a burst of shouting whose volume, if not its content, was readily audible in the room, and then his face went deathly pale.

"Mr. President," he said, swallowing hard and making his prominent Adams apple bob up and down visibly, "it's the Vice President. He says…" He paused, swallowing hard again. "Sir, what's going on?"

Plants snatched the phone without replying and listened as Roberts read the letter he had just received back to him verbatim, save only for the change of name and title.

"If it's true," Roberts finished in a hushed tone, "we'll have to capitulate."

The President shouted, "America will not surrender!"

"Then America will die!" the VP replied harshly, "If we get into a nuclear exchange with the Rebels, we've just signed the death warrant for both sides!"

"We can win – "

"Yes, we can win, at the expense of half our population and infrastructure! After they flatten every major city we've got, you can kiss Alaska and the entire West Coast goodbye, because the Russians and Chinese will have them by morning, and probably the rest of the country as well, or what's left of it after we've blown it all to hell! That's too high of a price to pay for your damned pride!"

Plants gaped like a landed fish, unable to believe anyone would talk to him that way.

"How dare you?"

"I dare because I've got family I want to see alive next week! I dare because I will not sacrifice what's left of the United States in order to force a part of it to remain that's already gone!" Roberts' tone evened out as he forced himself to regain his composure. "I've already been on a conference call with the President of the Senate, the Speaker of the House and the Joint Chiefs of Staff; Congress is gathering for an emergency session even as we speak to decide this issue."

"Congress has no authority! This is an emergency situation!"

"Congress is taking its authority back, and it's past time it did so!"

"Damn you, you've betrayed me too! I'll have you all arrested!"

"You will do no such thing. That letter has already been leaked to the press, and it's too big for even you to sit on. I strongly suggest you make no attempt to launch a military strike or to carry out any of your other threats. The American people, along with Congress and a substantial portion of the loyal government and

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military, will not stand by and watch you destroy what's left of America." His next words were pronounced individually, like precision sniper shots in order to get the point across. "We-will-not-*allow*-it!"

Plants gaped, wanted to say something, to say anything that would deny what his Vice President had said, but the faintly glowing spark of sanity still flickering inside him made that impossible. If he tried it, someone would stop him, almost certainly by killing him, and he had no way of knowing who. There was no way of knowing who was loyal to him and who wasn't. While he vainly sought the words that would not come, he looked at Goldstein, anxiously awaiting his response. *Hell, for all I know, it could even be him; maybe he's waiting to see what I'll do before he decides to put a bullet in my head or not. If not him, maybe the Secret Servicemen right outside the door…*

While the President struggled with his paranoia, Roberts spoke again, softly and reasonable this time.

"Listen, Jack; we've lost this one. Hell, we lost it a long time ago; most people on both sides are sick of this damned war. It's time to put it behind us, learn from it, and move on. Think of it as streamlining, downsizing. We've still got the industrial base, the Midwest breadbasket, and the Alaskan oil fields; getting rid of those Southern malcontents will give us an even better country than before. Right now, the most important thing is putting a united face on this. Come on down and address the Congress in the morning, then you and I and the Speaker can stand up there together and declare peace. Even better, call a press conference and do it right now, yourself. You can say that this has gone on long enough, and, in the interests of preventing further bloodshed, enough is enough. Let's concentrate on getting what we can during the negotiations and rebuilding what's left of America. Do it yourself before the protests begin – and you know they will – and you'll come out looking in full, calm control of the situation. You won't be the man who lost the Union; you'll be the man who saved America! What do you say?"

It was a long time before the President could manage to speak as his world collapsed around him, but his politician's instinct said loud and clear that the choice was now out of his hands. It was either capitulation or a coup.

"All right," he murmured softly and hung up the phone. Turning to Goldstein, he said, "Send for my speech writer."

"Yes sir. Will there be anything else?"

"Just get the hell out of here, and don't let anyone else in."

"Yes, Mr. President."

Once his Chief of Staff was gone, President Plants sat at his desk in the Oval Office, staring at nothing. There was nothing to look at, really, either in the darkened office or inside his darkened soul.

Roberts was right…but that doesn't make me hate that treacherous son of a bitch any less! He should have stood by me, damn it! I'm the President!

The ultra-patriotic Republican had done the unthinkable; he had presided over the breakup of Lincoln's Union. It didn't matter that he'd fought a two and a half year war in an effort to prevent it, or that he had no choice but to let the South go now, severing it like an infected limb to save the rest of the body. His Vice President's betrayal had shattered the imagery he had built up around himself until even he had come to believe it, and had shocked him back into reality. If the Rebels launched those missiles...

We won't survive a nuclear war as a country, even though we'll be the ones to win it. When the dust clears and we're too decimated to resist effectively...we'll all be speaking Chinese.

The really sad part of it was that things had gotten so bad lately – again, under his watch, as the gleeful Democrats in Congress could be counted on to point out – that there was a sizable minority of the population that would welcome even that, as long as they'd have food on their tables, reliable power to their homes, and stability in their lives once more. He heard one of them actually say on the news – an American expatriate on the foreign news, of course, since he would have been immediately arrested here – that Kennedy's famous "*Ask not what your country can do for you...*" remark was nothing more than a *"bullshit sound bite,"* and that, *"If a country won't do anything for its citizens who have bled and starved for it, it isn't much of a damned country!"*

Plants shook his balding head in combined disgust and disappointment. Didn't they understand that America was eternal and ordained by God Almighty, and to stand against the USA was to stand against God

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Himself?

Bunch of heathen bastards! I blame the damned Pope!

Still, he knew he could blame the Pope and everyone else until he was blue in the face, but the fact remained that the United States was simply not strong enough at this point to weather even the limited nuclear attack the South could mount...and now that he'd had a chance to cool down slightly, he retained enough of his sanity to know beyond a doubt that they would mount it, even though they had to know they'd get far worse in return.

Damned un-American fanatics, even getting in bed with the Russians! I wish Sherman would have killed them all while he was down there!

He heard the door opening, and without looking up, he barked, "I said I didn't want to be disturbed!"

"Oh, I think you do, Mr. President," the thickly-accented voice said pointedly as the intruder ignored his obvious wishes and entered, closing the door behind him.

Plants recognized John Ostrovsky of course; if the man didn't have the highest clearance, he wouldn't even been in this wing of the White House, let alone be allowed to simply waltz into the President's office. Only a handful of men could do that, and, when it came right down to it, Ostrovsky was higher up the Washington food chain than any of them.

John was simply...John. The grandson of Russian Jewish immigrants, the unassuming pot-bellied, balding, gray haired man was a permanent fixture in the US intelligence community. Administrations meant nothing to him; Presidents and parties came and went, but he stayed...back in the shadows, where he did his work. He had to be in the shadows, because no administration would survive some of the things he had done if the light of day had shone on them. At sixty, his position was secure; he knew too much about everybody and everything for anyone to even contemplate trying to get rid of him. Besides, he got things done. When he made a plan, no matter how outlandish it sounded, it generally worked. His only major failure the President could think of offhand was that he had been the late FEMA station chief Ronald Peters' mentor, but then Peters wasn't under his direct supervision in South Carolina when he let everything go straight to Hell either.

Slouching over to the desk with his stooped walk and his fine suit stinking of good cigar smoke, his voice a slightly nasal rasp, he said, "I have a way to get everything back in a few months, as long as you're not squeamish."

President Plants leaned forward with interest and a flickering of renewed hope. Squeamishness had never been one of his problems.

"How?"

Ostrovsky flopped his bulk down into a chair and tented his thick fingers with satisfaction.

"The Confederates have always been unpredictable; that's how they won. There is a time coming soon, however, when they will be completely predictable. We will have the opportunity take out their entire leadership at one time, and in one place, while at the same time neutering their nuclear capabilities. Best of all, we'll be able to do it in a deniable manner, blaming the whole thing on someone else." He grinned. "As a bonus, you won't just regain the Union; you'll expand it, until it includes all of North America!"

Plants leaned forward with excitement.

"Tell me more!"

Frank's headquarters held all the grim expectancy of a deathwatch. Mike sat, facing the computer screen with his back to all of them – Frank, Samantha, Sam, Billy, Cynthia, Lucky Charlie, Hodges, and Vika – while they all tried their best not to make him uncomfortable by staring over his shoulder, trying to see the message they both hoped for and dreaded. If they bothered him, however, Mike gave no outward sign. Instead he sat, his fingers dancing over the keys while his face was as frozen and hard as a granite statue.

Outside, the situation was much the same. As soon as everyone in the field had moved on their objective, Frank had quietly called a meeting and passed the word to his officers, who had in turn passed it on to the men. Every one of the Irregulars, other troops, and auxiliaries in their makeshift headquarters were up and about, whether officially on duty or not; no one was likely to sleep now. The ones not on guard gathered in small groups, huddled around radios, TVs, or computers, or simply watching the night sky and waiting to see

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the telltale streaks that would indicate death coming down.

It may have been as foolish-appearing of a gesture as arranging the deck chairs on the Titanic, but everyone at their headquarters, without consulting any of the others, had dressed for the occasion. Each one was in full uniform – or as full as they could get, which was sometimes no more than their cleanest jeans and tee shirts – and carried themselves with a quietly respectful, almost formal bearing. A lot of hands were shaken, apologies for real and imagined wrongs offered and accepted, candy and cigarettes shared, bottles secretly passed, and quiet prayers offered up. Each man and woman of the Rebel force knew that this might very well be the last thing they ever did, and they wanted to do it right.

"We should know shortly," Frank said, looking at the clock for what had to be the thousandth time that evening."

"Victory or TEOTWAKI," Mike muttered without any discernable emotion, pronouncing it "tee-oh-tee-wahkee."

"What's TEOTWAKI?" Billy asked, and it was Samantha who answered.

"The end of the world as we know it."

His brow furrowed in disbelief.

"The whole world?"

"Not really," she told him, "just the world as far as we're concerned."

"Oh. Well, that still sucks."

She patted him on his hairy, tattooed arm even as she strained for the reassuring smile that stubbornly refused to come.

"Yeah, pretty much, big guy."

Trying to reassure them, Frank added, "It's TEOTWAKI whether we win or lose; either way, the world will never be the same again."

"I just hope it changes because we won," Samantha said with a fearful grimace as she pulled her daughter tighter, and her husband moved beside her to put his arm around her shoulder and caress his daughter's soft cheek with the scarred, calloused fingers of his free hand.

"You and me both, honey; you and me both."

Samantha lowered her face to Linda's head and the clean, fresh smell of the toddler wafted into her nostrils, the scent of her own flesh and blood. She knew she held the future in her arms, and wondered if this was the last time she'd be able to do that.

Meanwhile Mike was studying the screen intently, and Frank frowned when he saw the Intelligence Officer's shoulders shaking with emotion and Cynthia instantly moving to his side, resting a hand on each of his shoulders as she looked over him. It was alarming, as Mike had shown no public emotion about much of anything since Kerrie O'Brien's death.

"Mike!" he said, quickly crossing the room, "What is it? What's happened?"

The only thing Samantha could think of was the worst: *They've launched. Oh my God, they've launched!* She pulled Linda closer yet, holding her protectively for what she knew might be their last seconds together, depending on where the missiles hit. Even though she wasn't Orthodox, she had been around Vika so long she imitated the Russian's frequent gesture and crossed herself.

Yeah though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil…but, God, I'm so afraid!

When Mike turned his wheelchair to face them, they saw his face was wet with tears and twisting as if fighting half a dozen emotions at once.

"They capitulated...We won...We're...*free*!"

Samantha would have fallen on her knees if Lucky Charlie hadn't grabbed her and hugged her tightly with excitement, making Linda squeal when the cold metal of his artificial arm touched her. Sam grabbed Mike despite Cynthia already holding onto him, only to have the three of them all but disappear in Billy's embrace. Everyone seemed to be enthusiastically mauling someone else, and Victoria was no exception; in fact, she was surprised when an overjoyed Sam grabbed her and not only hugged her, but kissed her hard on the mouth. She was not nearly as surprised at his actions as he was, however; realizing what he had done, he quickly let go

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and turned away, his face coloring. No one else paid any attention; they were all screaming and whooping and hollering...all except for Frank. Samantha immediately noticed, and disentangled herself from Cynthia's embrace, and went to him, tentatively putting her free hand on his broad shoulder.

"Honey, what is it?"

For one of the few times since she had known him, she saw fear in his eyes.

"It may not be over."

Chills ran down her spine like dozens of scrambling spiders.

"But they said – "

"They lie," he said between tightly-clenched teeth, "They've done it before."

She couldn't help but cry at the thought, and he pulled her close and held her.

"I-I-I just hoped so m-much it was over!"

He stroked her back. "Shh. It may be; hell, it probably is. I'm just not about to let our guard down, not yet! We haven't come this far to risk losing it all now!"

Part of her was comforted, but another part of her – her logic and hard-won experience – knew he was right. She knew her husband's paranoia – actually, *their* paranoia; it belonged to everyone involved including her – was a large part of what had kept them alive over the past couple of years, and she desperately hoped that was all this was. Right then, she literally began praying for the same.

Frank was doing some silent, equally desperate praying of his own. Cold hands seemed to be running up and down his soul, ghostly unintelligible voices were whispering in his mind's ear, the locket around his neck felt like an icy finger touching his heart, and he couldn't shake the feeling that something was going to go horribly wrong.

Jonathon Edge, hundreds of miles away on a captured sub at that moment, took the news the same way Frank did: with an extremely cautious optimism. For most of the affected, however, it was a different story. The word spread, and soon alarms were sounding all over Dixie and the Indian Nations, along with church bells, sirens, car horns, gunshots, and fireworks. Impromptu concerts, dances and parties broke out all over, spilling out of homes and bars and into the streets in a massive, countrywide celebration of hope, or, in many cases, just joy that the whole thing finally appeared to be over. The Southerners came to refer to it as the Night Without Sleep, because it seemed like nobody did.

Within the next few days, once the shock and the massive hangovers wore off and the work of building a new country began, many of those who had fought for it began to think that the war itself may have been the easy part. Later, as more time went by, they would come to know it had definitely been.

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DAY 930
CHAPTER 28

"I'd like to see my country's detainees as soon as possible."

"Of course, sir," Edge told the Canadian diplomat after they had shaken hands in General Lannigan's office at Fort Bragg. All the Southern forts and other military installations had been turned over to the Confederates, who had quickly assumed command and consolidated their positions. Bragg was chosen as a central location to hold all the foreign detainees due to Pope Air Force Base being next door, which made it convenient for the flights that would take them home to land directly. "We've got a limo waiting outside that will take us to them whenever you're ready."

The Diplomat – Edward Smith – along with Edge and Lannigan, made small talk during the short ride to the barracks that had been set aside for "our international guests," as they were euphemistically called, but Edge's mind was on other things; namely the advantages of having the Canadians and the others come to them in an official capacity. It meant diplomatic recognition on the world stage, and a giant leap forward for the Confederate States of America. Canada was only the first, he was certain; several other countries from Latin America, Asia, and Europe had had personnel training on US bases as well when they were swept up in the final act of the war. They were waiting for someone to break the ice and go against the obvious will of the United States in giving official recognition to the CSA by sending envoys to them, and, as Canada was closest, it fell to them.

When they pulled up and exited the car, the Confederate PFC standing at the door, armed with only a 9mm Berretta on his web belt, saluted in the relaxed manner of a veteran guerrilla, who had never had had much use for spit and polish nor time to learn it. Edge and Lannigan returned the gesture, and then the field Marshal told the soldier, "At ease. Which floor are our Canadian guests on, Private?"

"Third floor, sir, but I think they're all down in the rec room right now. Just go straight down this hall and it's the last door on your left, sir."

Although Smith didn't notice, neither Edge nor Lannigan missed the slight upward twitching at the corners of the guard's mouth, and they wondered what it meant.

They could hear the raucous noise when they opened the barrack doors, and they could smell the beer before they were halfway down the hall. When they stepped into the recreation room, they stopped, stunned.

There was a reason they smelled beer, because the trash can was full of empties, and there were partially full ones sitting here and there. All eighteen Canadians were inside, along with an assortment of Australians, New Zealanders, Brits, Frenchmen, and Germans, and a double handful Confederate soldiers. They were all shouting and yelling and pounding each other on the backs as they watched a football game in progress, waving slices of pizza and hot chicken wings from a huge tray full of them on a side table. One of the Southerners got up to get another handful when he noticed who was standing in the doorway.

"Oh shit!" was immediately followed by, "Attention!"

Everyone shot to their feet, several spilling their beers in the process, and one of the Canadians who had had a bit too much lost his balance and fell on top of the coffee table, sending chips and dip flying in all directions.

General Lannigan was livid.

"What in the hell is going on here?"

The Canadian still lying on the table, too drunk to get up, slurred, "We're watching a ballgame, eh?"

"Sir," one of the Southern soldiers hurriedly broke in before the Canadian made things any worse, "we're all off duty, so we came over to party with our friends here."

"That's right, General," a Canadian SAS officer wearing captain's insignia and looking slightly more sober than the rest confirmed, "They've got a standing invitation to our rec room whenever they're off duty."

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"What's wrong with your own rec room?" Lannigan demanded, and one of the Confederates halfway grinned as he answered, perfectly reasonably, "We're not allowed to have beer in there, sir."

Suddenly the diplomat began to laugh, and it took him a moment to get himself under control.

"I…I think you've taken good care of our people, Field Marshal Edge." He paused to get his breath, looked at the semi-conscious one writhing on the coffee table and smearing himself with French onion dip in a futile attempt to get up, then snorted, "Maybe a little too good."

Turning to the soldiers, he said, "I'm Edward Smith of the Ministry of State, and I'm here to take you home."

The Canadian Captain looked at him, then at his comrades and the other soldiers in the room, and shook his head.

"Can it wait until after the game? We've got money riding on this thing, and we're about to take these Southerners to the cleaners!"

A good natured voice with a deep North Carolina drawl muttered from the back of the room, "We'll see about that!"

Lannigan looked at Edge, who shrugged, gave a rare smile, and turned to the diplomat.

"Looks like we'll have to wait, Mr. Smith. Would you care for some beer and chicken wings?"

While the Field Marshal ate the blazing hot wings and washed them down with a single beer as the cheering men watched before going back to their game, he realized that this minor breakdown in discipline had probably just advanced relations between the various countries farther than years of conventional diplomacy. Putting the cool glass of the bottle to his burning lips, he thought, *I'll definitely drink to that!*

None of them could have known it then, but Edge was more right than he knew. No one had any way of knowing just how much those relations would advance, or what effect they would eventually have on the balance of power in the world. They also had no way of knowing that not everyone standing in the rec room drinking beer and eating chicken wings would be alive to see it happen.

Mayor William 'Bill' Sidler and Police Chief John Carter of Columbia, South Carolina sat alone in the conference room of the City Building, waiting for their guest. "Guest" may have been the wrong term, because this "*guest"* had summoned *them*, and, despite their own power, they knew they had absolutely no choice but to appear.

Finally, after a very brief wait that seemed interminable, the doors opened, and both men immediately stood up when Frank Gore walked into the room in his new gray dress uniform. There were some brief greetings and handshakes, and then Frank told them to sit down while taking a seat himself.

Before he could speak, the Mayor said, "I'm glad to see you again, General. I want to thank you for protecting my family from the Feds, and for taking such good care of them!"

"That was not a problem," Frank assured him, "You held up your end of the deal and I held up mine. I hope our professional relationship continues to work just as smoothly in the future."

Mayor Sidler swallowed down a big lump of relief in his throat. Until this moment, he had seriously doubted that the Confederates would leave him in office to have a professional relationship with.

Chief John Carter looked back and forth between the two and caustically muttered, "Now I know how I got my promotion."

Sidler shrugged with a halfway grin. "That's politics."

"I guess that's one thing that will never change, no matter who runs things."

"That's where you're wrong," Frank told him bluntly, "This isn't going to be politics as usual, not any more."

The Mayor and the Chief looked at one another, and it was the city's chief executive who finally asked, "What do you mean?"

"I mean no more games and no more BS. Right now, in the aftermath of this war, before things start to settle down and while our military is in charge, is your chance to clean up Columbia. You can make it a city worth living in, and I expect you to do it."

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"How do we go about that?"

"You do what you have to. Our officers are meeting with every state, county and local law enforcement agency across South Carolina right now, even as we speak, but this is the Capital, and the closest thing I have to a hometown. Further, since I know both of you, I wanted to give you this personal briefing myself." Frank locked eyes with them, and his sincerity was plain. "Now's your chance to get shed of all your problems with no Federal judges, no self-appointed watchdogs, and no Jew lawyers looking over your shoulder and questioning your methods." Still looking straight into their eyes, he began outlining his plan, one virtually identical to that designed by the victorious Confederates to be put in place in every city in every Southern state. Round up any and all illegal aliens, habitual criminals, parolees for armed robbery, dealing hard drugs, rape and murder, and all known gang members, and hold them somewhere for deportation. Tear down the crack houses and any of the dilapidated projects that were overly crime ridden, and either sell the properties or turn them into parks. Then they were presented with a list of names. "These are known members of the NABP, the DJP, their contributors, various informers for the Feds, and other individuals who have actively opposed the Confederate war effort. They are to be immediately arrested and turned over to the South Carolina Militia. Most of the low-level offenders will be deported, but anyone whose actions caused death or bodily injury to any Confederate soldier, dependent, or civilian will given a military trial for treason against our people. Those found guilty will be dealt with accordingly."

The mayor only said, "You can't do that!" once, and then shut up when Frank asked, "Who's going to stop us? This was a revolution, and we won." The much more pragmatic Chief Carter only blinked in surprise a few times, but it was definitely a pleasant surprise.

"I want this for Columbia," Frank told them, "and for every city in Dixie. I want our country to be a place where women can walk without fear, and where children can play outside without being molested or shot. You two know what that will take, and whatever it takes, I expect you to make it happen."

Once Frank finished, the Mayor brightened and said, "You know, it just might work!"

"It *will* work," Carter stated with excitement, almost exhilaration blazing in his eyes, having no doubts. "This city – hell, this whole country! – has needed a damned enema for a long time, and you just handed me the nozzle. You know, Frank, you were always a maverick, but I think you've really outdone yourself this time."

Shrugging off the compliment with a grin, he told him, "Well, you know me; I aim to please."

Carter grabbed his hand and pumped it for all he was worth, and the first real smile he'd had in a long time spread its way across his face.

"Well, you aimed true."

British News Service

This latest American Revolution has given birth to some troubling issues. Reports coming out of the Confederate States of America indicate that the Southerners are purging their nation of everyone they perceive as an enemy. This list includes members and contributors to organizations that opposed the Confederates, various politicians and bureaucrats whose actions were antithetical to their philosophy, and career criminals. Many thousands are being forced out of the new country with nothing but the clothes on their backs, but hundreds have been arrested, dozens have disappeared, and a few have even been executed out of hand by the vengeful militias or lynched by civilian mobs. Thousands of others haven't waited, but have left the country on their own, often in fear of their lives.

The United Nations has called the situation "troubling," and has urged restraint on the part of the Southerners, and insisted on due process for those accused, while reminding the new government that being on the losing side is not sufficient cause for deportation and exile, let alone criminal prosecution. The unofficial response from a Confederate Revolutionary Government official who spoke in the condition of anonymity was, "Those people have been persecuting us for decades, and have given none of our people

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due process since the war began; what goes around, comes around. If you're an enemy of the Southern people, you don't belong in the South. We don't want you and we don't need you, so you'd best get your damned ass out while the getting's good!"

The UN offered an olive branch in the form of membership in the body if they were willing to abide by international law governing their internal affairs, only to be rejected out of hand by Vice President of the Revolutionary Council, Dr. Andrew MacFie.

"Dixie" (the slang term for the Confederate States of America used by most Southerners) "is not interested in membership in the United Nations, now or ever. Our friends have already recognized us, and, as far as the Council and the Southern people are concerned, our enemies can go to Hell."

Columbia, South Carolina

"Wow!"

Frank and Samantha looked at one another, then back at the overly-bubbly ultrasound tech who was busy watching the screen while running her instrument over the greased surface of Samantha's belly. Frank was holding his wife's hand with one of his, while the other one was occupied with Linda, sitting on his lap and fidgeting. Finally, after the long months of war, peace broke out and Samantha had gotten to go to a real hospital, only to be faced with that incredulous remark.

"What?" they both asked, alarmed, but the tech's smile reassured them.

"Well, I'm really supposed to let the doctor read these first and let him tell you…"

"He can tell us again and we'll act surprised," Samantha said dryly, "I want to know what's wrong now."

"Oh, I can't see anything wrong, but I'd still better…"

"You'd still better tell me what made you go 'wow' – right now!" Samantha's naturally somewhat warm temper, aggravated by her Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, pregnancy, and the slightly frightening fact that she was sure her belly was considerably more swollen than she remembered being at this stage with Linda, began to show itself unmistakably in her tone.

"Well, since it's you two…" She paused, grinning and utterly unperturbed. "You'd better get ready for two more."

It was hard to tell whose eyes were wider as the pair looked at each other and then back at the tech.

"*Two* more?" Frank managed to choke out in a tone uncharacteristically high due to his throat that was suddenly so tight he felt like he was being garroted, and the tech nodded with another giggle.

"Yep; looks like you've got twin boys in there."

When she finally managed to get her gaping mouth closed, Samantha could only say, "Wow."

"Wow," Frank said at the same time.

"Wow!" Linda chirped from her position on her father's lap, having no idea what they were talking about but happily imitating them just the same.

No one paid much attention to the street work, other than it being yet another pain in the ass to traffic; still, the infrastructure was in such bad shape that even the delayed drivers were happy to see something, anything, being done. Besides, there was still far too much excitement in the air in the newly-reborn Confederacy for people to overly worry about anything so mundane.

One set of contractor's trucks and equipment blocked one lane of Main Street six blocks from its intersection with Gervais, right in front of the Capital, and the ubiquitous Mexican work crew was feeding what appeared to be a standard 4" diameter plastic line down the open manhole from a large, slowly rotating spool. At the intersection, another truck winched a cable upwards from yet another manhole, gradually pulling the line through the tunnel beneath the street.

Only a few yards ahead, another Mexican laborer on a yellow Caterpillar backhoe was digging a series of trenches in the lawn just to one side of the Capital steps, running all the way to the street. No one paid much attention to them either; everyone who was curious enough to ask was told by the White supervisor that the

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“leaking” sewer lines were being replaced. No, they were assured, there would be no interruption of service; the final connections would be put in late that evening, after everybody had gone home. No one asked anything else; after all, sewers aren’t particularly interesting to most people, and their work order and permits were prominently displayed, complete with all the official seals: something not to hard to get when there was a Union spy working in the South Carolina Capital.

Had anyone paid attention, they might have noticed that the Mexican "laborers" seemed to exhibit an unusually high degree of physical fitness, or that their eyes and faces were much harder than one would normally expect from sewer workers. They also might have noticed that the pipe, like the line being threaded beneath the street, was abnormally heavy for hollow plastic.

Meanwhile, the work went on, with more and more line disappearing below the street.

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PART II

DECONSTRUCTION

"*We've had a hundred and fifty years of Reconstruction; now it's time to start the Deconstruction!"*

~ Dr. Andrew MacFie, Acting Vice President, Confederate States of America Provisional Congress.

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A Citizens Handbook of Your Confederate Government

As of the day the Confederate States of America regained its independence following the Third American Revolution, the people of the affected states – Alabama, Arizona, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Maryland**, Mississippi, Missouri, New Mexico, North Carolina, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia**, and West Virginia** – are now part of a new country, and under a new system of government. As a citizen of your state, you need to understand how that system works.*

*(*This does not apply to the people living on those areas formerly designated as Indian Reservations. Those areas are now part of the Confederation of Native American Nations, an ally and largely autonomous territorial protectorate of the Confederate States of America. Those seeking more information on this subject should visit the website of the Provisional Congress.)*

*(**The status of certain parts of Maryland, Virginia, and West Virginia remain under negotiation as of this printing.)*

At this time, and until six years from our independence day, the Confederate States of America will be governed under martial law by the Provisional Congress (formerly the Provisional Council). This Congress shall function as a post-revolutionary government for a fixed period of six years. During that time, due both to the chaos and destruction of the recent war and to the century and a half of brainwashing our people have been subjected to by the occupying United States, the extraordinary powers of the Provisional Congress will be used to re-stabilize the South, reestablish our sense of purpose and identity, and pave the way for a smooth and gradual transition of power back to the states and to the Southern people. Effecting that transfer of power and reestablishing the Constitution within that period without causing chaos and undue hardship is the primary goal of the Provisional Congress.

The Provisional Congress is made up of one Congressman from each of the seventeen states, with Jonathon Edge of Virginia currently serving as Acting President and Andrew MacFie of Mississippi serving as Acting Vice President. Six years was the time chosen for rule of the Provisional Congress and its officers because that is the term a President may sit, as outlined in the Confederate Constitution of 1861. By the end of that six year period, that Constitution will be fully in place once more and elections will be held according to its stipulations.*

As of this printing, the Council is currently involved in a complete review of Confederate Central Government Law – once US Federal Law; any such laws and agencies found not in full compliance with the dictates of the Confederate States of America Constitution will either be brought into line or else be struck from the books by the end of the six year period. Due to the sheer volume, this will be a long, ongoing process. Updates of all such changes will be released to the media and posted on the Provisional Congressional website at the end of each business day. It is hoped that, during the process, any changes that need to be made in order to bring our nation from the 19th century into the 21st will be discovered, and will be addressed at the Constitutional Convention scheduled for one year after the first election, in order to allow the freely-elected representatives of the states and the people to make those decisions, rather than the unelected Provisional Congress.

***FLAGS:** The official flag of the Confederate States of America is the Third National Confederate Flag, as approved by the last sitting Confederate Congress, and shall be flown above all Confederate General Government properties and military installations. The regulation display at all such official above-named sites shall be on a pole topped with a cross to show our country's submission to Jesus Christ*.*

The time-honored Confederate Battle Flag shall be flown at all military installations in a position

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subordinate to the National Flag.

These are your country's flags; please treat them with respect, but remember; in the end, they are flags, not objects of idolatrous worship. Unlike in the USA, no one will ever be asked to pledge allegiance to a piece of cloth. Here in Dixie, we merely honor it with the following salutation:

"*I salute the Confederate Flag with affection, reverence, and undying devotion to the Cause for which it stands."*

*(*While the Confederate States of America allows for freedom of religion, it also recognizes that Christianity is an inherent part of our culture and identity as a people; it is literally part of who we are. While the Congress shall not interfere with the practice of faith, it shall promote Christianity and the South's Christian character at every opportunity, and will regard all denominations of Christianity as equal).*

DEFENSE: *The Confederate States of America is not an aggressor nation, but recognizes the need for a strong defense in a dangerous world. It also recognizes that standing armies can easily become the enemies of liberty; therefore the national defense will be two-fold: the State Militias and the CSA Naval Department.*

The bulk of our ground forces will be made up of the militias, under the command and control of each state, except in times of war when, with their states' consent, they shall be placed under command of the Naval Department. Each state shall require all able-bodied male citizens between the ages of 17 and 45 residing within its borders and not on active duty with the Confederate Naval Department to serve, with the state being responsible for their arming and training.

Due to the necessarily international character of a navy that operates on the high seas, as well as the expense involved in operating surface ships, submarines, war planes, tanks, missiles, and other heavy weapons, all such functions shall be the responsibilities of the Naval Department. Under the command of the Secretary of Defense (as of this printing, General Franklin Gore), this department will be divided into three sections: Navy, Air Force, and Marines. In addition to defending the CSA in time of war, elements of the Naval Department shall also serve to secure our borders, acting as both Coast Guard and Border Security.

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DAY 932

CHAPTER 29

Columbia, SC

Several countries offered to host the historic negotiations. Russia made the first offer, but was rejected out of hand by the US because they were allies of the Confederacy. The Swiss bid was rejected for the same reason, even though they had remained strictly neutral during the conflict, something for which the United States would never forgive them. The Confederates rejected Israel as a possible site, since they had been allied with the US, and had acted against the Confederacy both directly and indirectly throughout the struggle. Iran, Venezuela and Cuba all made offers to host the process as well, although those was put forth more to dig at the defeated United States than as serious suggestions, since all three governments knew beyond a doubt they would be rejected by the Plants Administration. There was talk of somewhere in the European Union, but Canada stepped forward first and was accepted by both parties as the only logical choice, since, bordering on the nuclear-armed US and having given de facto diplomatic recognition to the likewise nuclear-armed CS, it had a very tangible stake in the two coming to a peaceful agreement. An old, luxurious hotel in Montreal was chosen for the actual venue, with the initial meeting scheduled to begin there in three days.

Sitting in his temporary office on Assembly Street in what was once the Strom Thurmond Federal Building, now rather grandiosely renamed the Linda Waddell-Robert Franklin Confederate States of America Central Government Building (named for two of the people martyred in Columbia the day the Revolution began), Provisional President Jonathon Edge looked carefully at General Frank Gore and Congressmen Sam Wirtz as he spoke.

"I'm not going to ask if you can do this, because I know you can. I'm just asking you if you will."

Both men were surprised, not at being selected as negotiators, but by being asked. The old Field Marshal Edge, Supreme Commander of the Confederate Army Provisional, would have simply ordered them to do so.

He's definitely mellowed out a lot! both of them thought. Of course, since he asked, they felt obligated to go, despite neither of them feeling really adequate for the task.

"We'll do it," they told him at once, but Edge shook his head.

"Not you, Frank; Sam's the one that's going as chief negotiator. You're too tempting a target for the enemy; they might try to kill you or bag you as a bargaining chip. I'm not going to take that chance. What I need from you is your advice. Just jump in whenever you have something to add."

That was not the entire story, although that it was the major part was true enough. Since the beginning of the war, Frank had changed considerably. His level of tolerance for bullshit had never been particularly high to begin with, and now, after all he and the people he cared about had gone through, it was practically non-existent. Lately, when irritated, he had developed a tendency to be every bit as blunt as Edge himself: something not particularly helpful in negotiations as delicate and difficult as these would be. The other reason was that the Provisional President owed both Frank and Samantha more than to put him at risk unnecessarily. They had one baby and two more on the way; they had a family, something Edge had once had a long time ago, but not so long ago he'd forgotten just how important that could be. Well, maybe he had forgotten for awhile, but meeting Victoria had reminded him.

Frank nodded, and Edge turned his attention to Sam, who was fully in his element with this project, and already talking.

"I'll need a list of things we think they'll demand, things open for compromise," South Carolina's

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Congressman began, “and things we don’t bend on. I’ll need it ASAP, so I can study up on it and not have to refer back to it during the negotiations.”

Edge smiled as he reached into his briefcase and slid both a bound printout and a flash drive across the table. “I knew you were going to say that. What else?”

“We need a staff of good people with the knowledge of some things we might not have ourselves,” Sam told him, and Edge nodded.

“Who do you want?”

Sam looked at the man beside him and said, “Who do you think, Frank?”

Frank Gore toyed with a pencil for a moment, pursing his lips in thought.

“Besides support staff – secretarial, research, et cetera – I think Jack Boggess and TJ Ashby should be on the team itself. Jack has a labor perspective and TJ a business one; also, that way, we’ll have people from all over Dixie instead of just South Carolina. Besides, having TJ will throw off the other team and give us an advantage.”

“How do you figure that?”

“CAPWARG tells me that US Secretary of State Lieberman is their best and most likely negotiator, especially for something this important, but he’s also got an overabundance of pride and ego. He’s actually been at TJ’s mansion in Louisiana several times. Now he knows TJ has played him for a fool for years, that he was actually a guest in a high-ranking Confederate operative’s home while you and I were meeting inside, which makes him look like an idiot. Based on the summation of the psychological profile they provided me, the odds are that Lieberman will refuse to attend, and would rather resign than do so. Plants can’t afford to lose any more friends, so he’ll have to send someone else, probably someone who lacks his Secretary of State’s experience and abilities.”

Sam nodded. “That would make my job a lot easier.

“Also, we need to include someone from our allies in the Indian Nations. If they’re going to be part of us, they need to be tightly bound to us, and feel they’re a part of the whole thing, from start to finish. The rest of us are all Southerners, with ethnic, cultural, and geographical ties. Other than the war and only the tail end of that, we don’t share those ties with the Indians, so we need to make it a point to include them in everything we do in order to keep us close together.” Spreading his hands, he added, “I know they’ve decided on a sovereign territorial protectorate rather than a state, but due to the old reservation system, that territory will be geographically scattered out amongst us, so we should try our best to keep them happy. We damned sure don’t need any more problems.”

“Amen to that,” Edge said, and Sam nodded and went on.

“I want the Navajo lawyer Benjamin Begay on the team.” He grinned. “He can be a first class horse’s ass sometimes, but that could be an advantage here, and his not being White will limit the other side’s responses to some degree; if they try to play the race card, he can deal it right back to them in spades. Besides, he knows the law, and, just as importantly, he’ll give the Indians a sense of direct participation.”

Edge’s smile grew wide enough to show his teeth, an expression that was very seldom seen.

“I knew I did right in bringing you two in here.”

Frank and Sam looked at one another, and each one knew the other was thinking the same thing. Sam nodded to him, and Frank sighed at being the one who was going to have to bring it up.

“Is this going to cause any problems with Dr. MacFie, what with him being left out?”

“No, I don’t think so. I’ve got the Vice President working on something more in line with his talents. He and I sat down and hashed things out last night. We both came to the conclusion that, while we still basically hate each other’s guts, our spheres of natural influence don’t overlap all that much, at least at this point in the game. We’ve declared a truce until the end of the fifth year, when we start running for election; then all bets are off. I’m going to deal with physical, nuts and bolts running of the government, while he’s going to concentrate on rebuilding the culture of our country. And let me tell you, we’ve both got our work cut out for us.” He frowned, just slightly. “What is it Frank?”

Frank had been smiling and shaking his head. “I was just thinking...you know, for the first time since we started this thing – before Columbia and the War, even – for the first time I really have hope that we’re going

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to succeed."

Shrugging off his reverie, he asked, "So, what am I going to be doing?"

"You're the Secretary of Defense, so, before Sam leaves, I want you to review the military parts of that data I gave him, and begin making plans around it. There's going to be more than enough to do after these talks are over, so you might as well get a leg up."

"I'll be ready."

"I know that, but you won't actually be doing it. I just need your plan; I'll assign some people to take it from there for the first few weeks, anyway."

"Okay..." Frank said cautiously, making Edge smile tightly.

"At that point, I'll have another job for you...and Sammie."

Frank simply stared, wondering what this one would be.

"The Indian forces need inspected, and we need someone with name recognition on the ground out there for a week or so, just to show them we care, and we value them. I especially don't want them to think we've used them only to cut them loose when they're no longer needed. The western tribes live in a beautiful part of the country, and I know they'll be happy to wine and dine you, as well as give you the VIP tour. Your job will be to listen to their concerns and make tactful suggestions, but mainly just to be seen. 'Schmoozing,' as the Yankees say."

"I think I can manage that."

Edge chuckled. "I thought so.

"After that, you're off to Japan for a week, followed by the Russian Federation for two more – more or less, your schedule is flexible, so there's no real hurry." Edge didn't mention what a delicate balancing act that scheduling had been in order to make sure neither country thought it was being slighted. They needed Russian military aid, in particular the use of their satellites, but, with the South's shattered economy, they also needed some major Japanese investment in the worst way. On the advice of Victoria, he settled for sending Frank to Japan first, but making his visit in Russia twice as long. He knew somebody would still probably get in a diplomatic snit over it, but it was the best he could do. "Besides helping to strengthen our military and economic ties, they're all wanting to meet you. You'll be working, but, in the process, at least you'll finally get to have some kind of a honeymoon." He smiled tightly. "It'll have to be better than Sam's pig farm."

Sam laughed out loud.

"Hey, I resemble that remark!"

Frank was speechless for a second. He had expected to be in on the negotiations but…

But it's a chance to spend some quality time with my family!

"Wow...I don't know what to say except...thanks!"

"You're welcome." He meant that from the bottom of his heart. Jealous or not, he genuinely cared about Frank, cared about him one hell of a lot, and valued him even more. The younger man deserved this, without question, and what he would be doing would be invaluable for the Confederacy, but it was for Edge's benefit as well. With Frank on the road for the better part of a month while the Congress began the real process of building a government, it would give him a chance to be the leader in the limelight for a while, and begin establishing himself for a run for the *real* presidency during the first election. Of course, he didn't explain it like that, although he strongly suspected that Frank had at least an inkling of his ulterior motive but didn't mind. After all, neither he nor Samantha had any political aspirations whatsoever, and would probably be more than happy to have someone else steal a little of the pressure that went with being a celebrity. "Besides, I'm not doing it just for you; I'm doing it for me too. I want you and Sammie to have a chance to get all the extraneous war trauma you can out of your heads, because I'm going to need every last bit of your minds totally focused once you get back. We've got one hell of a lot of work to do!"

Sam nodded, adding, "Yeah; a whole country to build!"

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DAY 950

CHAPTER 30

Canadian Press Service

The territorial negotiations between the Confederate States of America and the United States of America have been finalized in record time. Perhaps both sides simply wanted to get the painful process over with. The main points of the negotiations are as follows:

In terms of territory, the Confederacy will retain all of Alabama, Arizona, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, Missouri, New Mexico, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, and Virginia. All of West Virginia below the northern panhandle will remain with the CSA, while the three counties of that panhandle will be ceded to the USA. The US will retain the bulk of Maryland surrounding Washington, DC, while the counties west of Washington County will become part of the CS. The Confederacy will also receive St. Mary's County containing Point Lookout, and the southern Delmarva Peninsula south of Caroline County, under the agreement that neither area will be militarized. Virginia will cede all land within one mile outside the current DC Beltway to the US, provided that it shall also be a demilitarized zone. The US will cede all Navajo Nation land in the Four Corners area, extending into Colorado and Utah, which will become part of the Confederation of Native American Nations, an ally and semi-autonomous territorial protectorate of the CSA.

The Ohio River will remain under the Confederate States' ownership at the beginning of Southern territory below West Virginia's northern panhandle, and they will take control over all dams and fisheries. US river traffic is still permitted as far as the Ohio's juncture with the Mississippi, although it will be subject to regulation and inspection by Confederate and state law enforcement within that stretch. Once at the Mississippi, all barges and cargo will be transferred to the control of CSA transportation companies. In the Chesapeake Bay, territorial lines shall remain virtually the same as the traditional state waters. A separate international fisheries and pollution management treaty for the Bay, the Atlantic Coast, and the Ohio River is currently being prepared for later discussion.

All military installations and equipment currently located geographically in the South will become property of the Confederacy; all in US territory will remain there. US armed forces personnel on either side will be allowed to choose in which country they and their families will live, subject only to the new immigration law just passed by the Confederate Provisional Congress. Those who decide to cast in their lot with the South will have their ranks and terms of enlistment transferred to the CSA Naval Department.

As far as the civilian population is concerned, the Confederacy has declared null and void all formerly Federally-mandated entitlement programs, with the exceptions of Social Security, disability, and military benefits, for which it will take up payments for native born Southerners or others who aided in the war effort on their behalf, and who remain in the South. The US will continue paying only those beneficiaries who reside in the US or in Mexico.

Meanwhile, the most famous Confederates, General Frank Gore and his wife Samantha and their child, have completed their visit to the Confederacy of Native American Nations and are continuing their diplomatic world tour…

Japan

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"General Gore, I don't know how to thank you for this honor you have shown me!"

Smiling at the sincerity in Nobuo Hiro's voice, Frank shook his head.

"The honor is mine, and your good company and this delicious meal is more than ample thanks." Raising his sake cup to their hostess, he added, "I've been treated to some fine food while in your country, but this is by far the best meal I've had since I arrived."

Asami smiled and looked down, blushing deeply at the compliment, as did her husband.

Both of them were still more than a little shocked. The General and his wife had spent a week hobnobbing with Japan's elite: industrialists, military officers, and even the Prime Minister. Deals were made worth billions of dollars – tens of billions! – and others were proposed that were worth even more. War games and officer exchanges were planned, and it was arranged that, at the earliest opportunity, a warship from each country would pay a visit to the other as an international statement of their friendship. Of course, the trip wasn't all business; the Confederates had also been to Mount Fujiyama and the other mandatory tourist destinations, and Frank had even taken the opportunity to put on a dry suit and go scuba diving in the frigid waters of Izu Oceanic Park. With all that was going on, Hiro, the lower-level diplomat and initial Japanese contact with the General during the war, was certain he had long been forgotten, until he received a message from Frank requesting permission to visit him at his home on their last day in his country. They were even considerate enough to let him know that he would have no need to prepare for their child, as Linda would be in the care of their pair of executive assistants/ bodyguards during their visit.

To say that he was shocked was an understatement, but he had little time to dwell on it. After all, not only did he have the famous couple's arrival to prepare for, but everyone in the diplomatic corps seemed determined to call him to ask questions and give orders or advice. His phone never seemed to stop ringing.

Asami was no help; she had her own problems. She had a sudden horrified fear that their spotless home was not clean enough for guests of such stature, and went into a frenzy of activity, in between cleaning and preparing for the meal. Her mother and sister were summoned to assist, and Hiro finally shooed them out only five minutes before General Gore was due to arrive, while assuring his nervous wife that everything was fine.

And it was; in fact, it was splendid. When he opened the door and saw Frank in his gray dress uniform and Samantha in her black dress and exquisite silver and turquoise squash blossom necklace presented her by the American Indians, he blinked once. Unlike most Americans, they had abandoned the casual look and had dressed properly for the occasion, showing both him and his house respect. Their greeting bow was also deliberately that of one equal to another, and their host had no doubt they had practiced it.

Hiro suspected that Frank had thoroughly briefed Samantha on Japanese customs, because, like her husband, she committed none of the *faux pas* that Westerners usually did, not that it would have bothered him overly if she had. Besides her obvious importance, although Hiro wasn't generally attracted to Western women, he had to admit this one wasn't at all hard to look at. Of course, he had both more courtesy and good sense than to indulge in anything other than an occasional casual glance, and did his very best to keep those above her slender neck.

The meal went perfectly, and, at its end, as Asami began gathering the dishes, Samantha politely asked her for a favor.

"Of course!" his wife had answered, doubtless willing to walk naked on her hands through the middle of Tokyo if her important guest requested it.

"Then please allow me to indulge in a custom from my country, and help you clear away the table." Glancing at Frank, she winked before turning back to the hostess. "I don't know about you, but I'd much rather help with the dishes than listen to men talk politics any day of the week."

Asami laughed so hard she nearly dropped the tray, and nodded enthusiastically.

At one time, Samantha might have felt a little guilty over the deception...well, maybe a lot guilty. She had no problem arguing politics with anyone, but Frank was more than her superior officer; he was also her husband, the man she loved, and it was part of her job as his wife to make him look good. There was no question that he wore the pants in their family, but he seldom exercised his authority over her, trusting her to

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have good enough sense that he didn't have to. She knew, though, that attitude might be seen as a weakness in an even more patriarchal society like Japan.

She knew that Hiro would dutifully report every last nuance of the couple's behavior to his superiors; after all, he was a patriot just like they were, and he owed his allegiance to his own people. Even though she didn't feel it was at all deserved, she was also enough of a realist to know her own reputation. That she, a veritable Valkyrie in many people's eyes, would publicly demonstrate her submission to her husband, would boost Frank's own status to the nth degree, especially with the Japanese, whose investments the renewed Confederacy was depending on to get its economy up and rolling again.

Of course, the feminists will probably want to burn me at the stake, but there you are.

Mentally, she shook her head at the way things had changed – the way she had changed. She had once been at least a borderline feminist of sorts herself, at least until she had met Frank. He had a great and abiding respect and appreciation for her strength, abilities and intelligence, as well as for her looks, but traveling the long, violent path they had walked together had taught her that, even though they were of equal importance, they were also very different because of their respective genders, with the inner differences being even greater than the outer. Her husband put her on a pedestal, and would gladly die for her or kill for her without a second thought; he had proven both more than once. If he was willing to do that, then she was willing to live for him.

Besides, even though she wasn't sure yet herself, the thought of some future time where she might have a sole career of being his wife and the mother to his children in a normal family situation had been gaining more and more appeal every time she thought about it. After all they had been through, it was like a dream taken root in her heart, and she wondered if it would ever have a chance to mature.

Once behind the kitchen door, Asami repeated her husband's thanks.

"You have done us so much honor, and boosted my husband's career more than we could have ever imagined!"

"I hope so," Samantha told her, handling the delicate plates with care, "not only for your sake, but for ours."

Asami cocked a perfectly trimmed eyebrow in surprise.

"Really? Why?"

Samantha leaned a little closer and whispered conspiratorially. "Frank has been talking up your husband to everyone he's met over here. He's really hoping he will become Japan's first ambassador to the Confederacy."

Asami's mouth worked, but no sound seemed to come out. That was what she had hoped too, and certainly what her husband hoped, but it was such a shock that one of the foreign leaders thought the same way that she was at a loss.

Seeing her predicament, Samantha reached out and took her hand. She continued, "Frank both likes and respects your husband, Asami; two things he doesn't give easily. Further, he considers him someone he can work with for the common good of both of our peoples."

"Th-thank you," her hostess managed to stammer, returning the friendly squeeze on her fingers, and Samantha smiled again.

"I hope he's selected too. After all, you'd be living in Richmond then, and it would give me a chance to have you and your husband for dinner, to pay you back for being such a kind hostess."

"What's going on?" Frank asked from the back seat of the limo. There was a huge crowd, primarily made up of teenagers and young twenty-somethings along the sidewalk opposite the airport. Many of them were in strange, often downright bizarre costumes, and uniformed police officers were holding them back as they jumped up and down and shouted, their words reduced to an unintelligible roar by the closed windows.

"I'm sorry, General Gore," Sato, their official diplomatic escort sitting across from them said, "but they somehow found out when you were coming this way."

Looking at the mob, it was obvious they were friendly – maybe too friendly, almost ecstatically so – but there must have been a several thousand of them. He shook his head in disbelief.

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"All these kids came down here just to see us?"

"Not exactly, sir." Sato squirmed inwardly, not at all certain how Frank was going to take the truth, but knowing he knew too much Japanese not to understand at least part of what the crowd was shouting, and figure it out if he was being lied to. How he might react to a falsehood was anybody's guess, and in diplomatic circles, not one worth taking. The diplomat didn't pretend to understand Western attitudes, and this one was from a whole new country, and a people noted both for extreme politeness and extreme volatility. He had once heard is said that, "Southerners are unfailingly polite, right up until the time they kill you."

He suddenly smiled inwardly. *Then our peoples have something in common after all!*

"You are familiar with Manga comics?"

"Yes." Frank was familiar with them more in passing; while he appreciated some of their subtle nuances, he much preferred the Western style of comic art he had grown up with. Still, he had read several of them, in large part because Cynthia was a hardcore fan, and she often left one or two lying around. The hardest thing for him had been getting used to reading from back to front and right to left, as even most of the English versions were laid out in the traditional Japanese fashion.

"Well," Sato continued, "these are *Otaku*: hardcore fans. There is a Manga convention going on in the center right there across the street, and your comics are very popular."

"*My* comics?"

"*Hai*. Your adventures, as well as those of your illustrious wife and courageous bodyguards, have become the favored subject of several artists, and are in high demand."

"Damn!" Billy exclaimed with a booming laugh, "They went and made a comic book about me!"

Frank glanced at Samantha, who twitched her head with an amused grin in Cynthia's direction. Seeing the normally stoic nineteen year-old looking wistful and moon-eyed at the convention center, he had to smile himself.

"Sato-san, would it be possible for us to go in there for a few minutes? I'd hate to disappoint these young people who seem to like us so much."

Samantha felt like going, *'Awww,'* because she knew darn good and well he was talking about Cynthia rather than the crowd of Japanese fans. His thoughtfulness never failed to make her love him all the more.

"If you wish, General," the diplomat said with a smile, already thinking of ways they could later put the propaganda coup to good use.

The few minutes turned into three hours, and, when they boarded the plane that had been held for them, all four felt like they had arthritis in their hands from all the comics they had signed.

"Good grief," Samantha said, looking down at her disheveled appearance, "I look like I just came through a battle!"

"You'll have to speak up," Frank told her with a laugh, looking just as mussed, "I think all that squealing those girls were doing in there busted my eardrums."

She couldn't resist teasing him. "You know you loved every minute of it! You looked like a rock star, with all your little teenage groupies climbing all over you!"

He grinned and pointed at the big man with his thumb. "Billy's the one they were climbing all over." Turning to his bodyguard, he asked, "You were holding how many while they took your picture? Four at once?"

"Six," Billy corrected him with a big smile, "one on my lap, on each knee, one in each arm, and one sittin' up astraddle of my shoulders. I'll probably smell feminine for days."

"I notice you weren't protesting too much either," Samantha observed with a quirked smile and a raised brow, and he shrugged.

"The price of fame, I reckon." He laughed again. "To be honest, for a while there I thought I'd done died and got sent to Japanese Heaven by mistake." With another shrug of his massive shoulders, he added, "Could've done worse."

"I think Cynthia's the one who was in Heaven, surrounded by all those comics. How about it, Cynthia?"

Cynthia had her face buried in one of the books in question – one of the hundreds of issues that had been

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forced upon them as gifts when she tried to buy one. It seemed that every artist thought it would be a feather in his or her cap to be photographed giving the Gores and their bodyguards a copy of their magazine, and, as a result, they ended up with about fifty pounds of them. Cynthia had grabbed one as soon as they boarded, and reluctantly looked up from it.

"Well, I will have to say I was popular; I got about four hundred requests for dates, forty to go back to someone's hotel room, and four marriage proposals." Lowering her eyes back to the pages of the comic, she said, "I don't know why they were so attracted to me...*oh my God!"*

Seeing her normally light complexion turning a livid, almost impossibly dark red, Frank was thankful their plane was already in the air, because the petite girl looked like she was ready to go back and shoot somebody.

"What is it?"

"Look what they did to me!" she yelled, shoving the book at him.

He and Samantha thumbed through the pages, and quickly realized what had upset their friend. All of them were figured in there, and readily recognizable despite the highly stylized Manga art style. There were Frank and Samantha in their fatigues, an even larger-than-life Billy in his biker duds, and Cynthia...

Neither of them could help laughing. Cynthia had still been in high school when she joined up, so the artist had put her wide-eyed caricature in a schoolgirl uniform, with a way-too-short plaid skirt that was constantly riding up, flashing her panties on every page as she blasted away at assorted Yankees with over-sized pistols and submachine guns, and slashed at them with knives.

"It's not funny!" she raged, clenching her fists and only increasing their mirth. Billy, studiously engrossed in another issue nodded and pointed at a frame in the one he was holding.

"You're right, it's not funny. In fact, I think it's kind of cute, especially this one here with the *'Hello Kitty'* underpants. Maybe you should try it; it's a good look for you."

Quickly grabbing another of the comics, she slapped him hard across the head with it, with the effect of only making everyone laugh even more.

Tokyo News Service

The impromptu visit by the famous General Gore, his wife and their entourage to the Manga convention near the airport has caused quite a stir throughout Japan. That a celebrity, a figure of power, would not only take the time out of his busy schedule to meet our young people, but was confident enough to simply walk into the hall with his family with no prior security screenings and no extra guards, and interact freely with our citizens with no apparent concern for his safety, is a compliment beyond measure to our country.

Perhaps even more of an honor was the off-the-cuff speech he made upon his departure to catch the plane that was waiting to carry him to Russia on the next leg of his diplomatic tour. After being told by several teenagers at the event that he, his wife, and their bodyguards were their heroes, he asked permission to take the podium for a moment, a request which the event organizers were more than eager to grant. Then he made a short speech in Japanese, in which he is fluent. Below is one of the excerpts from it.

"*Many of you have told me that we are your heroes, and we are both honored and flattered; you have my thanks. However, you must never forget that you also have heroes of your own, from your own race and your own history, men and women greater than I will ever be. I am proud to consider you, their descendants, among my friends.*

"*Never allow yourselves to become so fixated on things outside that you forget where you came from, and who you are. You are a great people, with a gracious culture, a glorious history, and a beautiful country; never forget that, not even for a moment.*

"*If I may ask one favor of you, it is this: never stop being Japanese, for you, the world, and myself, would be immeasurably poorer without that."*

By the time the General and his party were in the air, expressions of gratitude were following him from

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several conservative and traditionalist Japanese political and cultural organizations, and it is rumored that the Emperor himself is sending a letter of thanks. It is safe to say that General Gore has made many friends on this trip, both for himself and for the Confederacy, so much so that several large businesses have already begun calling board meetings, reportedly with the idea of expanding their operations into the new country in a greater way than first anticipated, due to its friendly atmosphere...

Later that night – much, much later, long after the Gores had left – Hiro lay smiling in the darkness. He couldn't help it, and couldn't have stopped if he had tried, and he didn't. He had been immediately called in for a debriefing following Frank's departure, where he had relayed all the particulars of every part of the conversation, every last nuance he could recall of his guests' expressions, until his superiors in the diplomatic corps had wrung from him every bit of knowledge he could provide. Evidently it matched the data that the government agents had collected; he was almost certain they had bugged both his phone and computer, and had listening devices in the security van that had been parked outside. Probably they had, but he hadn't seen anything definite and would've pretended not to if he had. It was understood; it was the nature of the business and nothing personal. Whatever it was, it was enough; his friend and colleague Toshiro had emailed him not long after he finally arrived back home to tell him, unofficially of course, that it looked like he would soon be addressed as 'Mr. Ambassador.'

Following that revelation, he and Asami had celebrated by making love with an intensity that had first surprised and then utterly exhausted both of them. Glancing at her lying on her side next to him, he could see her short dark hair contrasting with her pale skin in the darkness, and hear the slow, even breathing that told him she had reached the sleep he was still far too excited to achieve. He gently stroked his fingers down the ivory smoothness of her back and she stirred slightly, murmuring in contentment. She was so innocent and childlike sometimes, and he loved her dearly and was glad she was there to share his triumph.

Pulling his hand back and interlacing its fingers with those of its partner, Hiro cupped them behind his head and stared up at the ceiling with a broad grin, knowing he wasn't going to sleep and not caring at all. He wondered what it would be like, living in the capital of a new, vibrant country, fresh from a successful revolution. Challenging, certainly, and exciting, definitely...not to mention rewarding, both monetarily and career-wise, especially as the personal, friendly acquaintance of two of its most influential heroes.

Whatever happened, he really hoped it was good, because he wasn't sure how long his luck would hold. Things had been going so well lately it scared him, just a little.

Kosovo

Pristina, capitol of the once-Serbian province of Kosovo, was like many other former Communist Block cities. It was a gray, depressing-looking place, even without the leafless trees and the leprous patches of dirty snow, and looks weren't deceiving. The blocky multi-story buildings were plain and utilitarian on the outside, as befitted a marketplace that trafficked in everything, but specialized in violence and human misery.

Inside, many of the structures were another matter; they were furnished with all the luxuries anyone could want, and all the modern technology one would expect of any other international business empire. Still, one's power was defined by the size of the building he occupied, and a friendly associate was likely to hold a smaller one, like the four story concrete structure now hosting a meeting with four very disparate men.

CIA Station Chief Alvin Cornell personally disliked the men he was dealing with right now, nearly as much as they disliked him. Still, even though they all had very different agendas, they still worked together cordially anytime they had a common cause, which was more often than anyone not involved in the intelligence trade might imagine. It was business as usual in the Balkan backwater that had become, in many ways, the crossroads of the shadow world of international crime and espionage.

In forcing the grossly over-matched Serbs to surrender their traditional heartland, some strange alliances had formed. That was why an American CIA man was sitting at the same table with a high ranking Kosovo Liberation Army general and a Chechen rebel chief, both of whom were also ranking members of the Al Qaida

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terror group, and an Israeli Mossad station chief, sipping strong coffee and making conversation. Arms to the Chechens, heroin from Afghanistan, Ecstasy from Tel Aviv, and Eastern European women sold into forced prostitution all passed through here, with the Kosovar-Albanian mafia and the KLA – for all practical purposes, one and the same – acting as the middle man and taking a cut. The CIA, Mossad, MI6, various Islamic terror groups, and the Russian Jewish, Turkish, Georgian, and Israeli mobs made money hand over fist from all of it. Kosovo was cut out of Serbia as neutral ground exactly for that purpose. The place was an international bazaar, making deniable cash for all, and allowing agencies from slightly more open societies, such as the United States and United Kingdom, to carry on an additional black budget behind the scenes, spending far more than Congress or Parliament would ever authorize. Coupled with the above board money secretly laundered through Trojan horses such as supposed two thousand dollar hammers and five thousand dollar toilet seats for the same purpose, it gave them a comfort zone and allowed expensive contracts to be made that would otherwise not have been possible.

"It will cost you one hundred million dollars – Euros, not American," the Chechen, Muhammad Abdul, told the CIA man, smiling pleasantly through his thick black beard. The Kosovar, Ibrahim Abazi, smiled too, but said nothing; his only business was to make sure of the amount, so he could get his fair share.

Cornell took a sip of his coffee, considering.

Patience, patience, he reminded himself.

"The offer was ten million."

Abdul's smile grew broader. "It was one hundred million during your war, and that is just for him; we will kill his family also. After all, his wife is just as important as he is, yes?"

"I could conceivably go twenty-five..."

Abdul's black, heavy-browed eyes went hard. He found it insulting that the rich Americans would try to nickel and dime him because he was a Muslim exile, and he decided to up the ante.

"One hundred million, with half up front, *in addition* to Abazi's ten percent," he demanded, nodding at the Kosovar, who, being a man of few words, silently nodded back in satisfaction at the figure even as he ran the calculations in his head and planned what he would do with the ten million coming his way, "Euros, not American dollars. Plus, you have to arrange things in Russia."

"That will cost millions by itself!"

"No," Ari Silverman spoke up. The Mossad station chief's face was set as hard as the Chechen's. "We will arrange support through our contacts on the ground there. It's the least we can do." He knew the Jewish mafia in Russia would do whatever Mossad told them to, be it smuggling people and weapons or paying the requisite bribes to make that possible. "Between the two of them, they are responsible for the deaths of five of our agents; we owe them something." Looking at Abdul, the Israeli added, "Be certain you kill their child too; their entire line must perish! If you can, let them see her die before they do!"

Abdul nodded his agreement even as Cornell's head bobbed his own appreciation. The station chief would have eventually agreed anyway, but the money he saved could be applied toward some other operation. Regardless, this one would be worth it. The assassinations of Frank and Samantha Gore, the heroes of the Confederacy, on Russian soil would drive a wedge between the two countries, and force a breech that would never heal. Separating the new country, still in its infancy, from its primary military backer while simultaneously killing its top military mind would weaken it to the point of ineffectiveness, and then...

Cornell didn't know exactly what would come after that, but he had no difficulty making an educated guess. He saw no reason why it wouldn't work. After all, he had heard some scuttlebutt that this was Ostrovsky's plan, and he seldom failed.

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CHAPTER 31

Confederate News Service

One of the most important acts passed by the Provisional Congress so far came into being today, and dealt with the hot potato of immigration.

In a unanimous decision, the Congress repudiated most of the amnesty and refugee agreements made by the United States, and removed the so-called 'anchor baby' provisions allowing anyone born to parents who were here illegally to automatically be a citizen, and has made these laws retroactive.

"Your agreement was with the United States," Vice-President Andrew MacFie said in a televised address at the bill's signing, "and, if you want to continue to live under its umbrella, you must either go there, or go back home. If you need it, transportation to the border will be provided to you, free of charge. You may apply for reentry into the Confederate States of America only from another country after you depart our borders, and all applications will be carefully considered.

"If you own property and do not plan to return or cannot return to the Confederacy, this bill has made provisions for you to put it up for sale through any participating Southern realtor, with the full, tax-exempt proceeds of the sale being transferred to whatever account you specify.

"I strongly suggest you comply with this law within the period specified. Anyone falling under these provisions who fails to leave during that time will be considered to be an illegal alien, subject to imprisonment and subsequent deportation, with no chance of reentry and no compensation for lost assets."

The new law deals with the problem in no uncertain terms, as President Jonathon Edge pointed out.

"If you entered this country in any way except through the proper channels, you are a criminal trespasser, and subject to being treated as such. Anyone here illegally has ten days from the passage of this law to report to the nearest law enforcement office. After you register, you will be given the additional twenty days (for a total of thirty) to get your affairs in order, and then you have to leave. Failure to do so will result in a mandatory imprisonment of one month at hard labor on the first offense followed by deportation with no possibility of appeal or re-admittance. Anyone, individual or organization, knowingly concealing or harboring illegal aliens will be subject to up to one year of hard labor, confiscation of all assets, and the loss of citizenship, followed by deportation.

"Make no mistake; Dixie is our country, and we're taking it back!"

President Edge also took pains to specify that there would be no exceptions. When asked by one reporter if the penalties against harboring aliens would also apply to churches and other religious organizations, many of whom have vowed to defy the law, he responded with, "What part of 'no exceptions' don't you understand?"

There are, in fact, some exceptions listed in this bill, however. Anti-Communist refugees from Cuba, whose community generally supported the Confederacy during the Revolution, are welcome to remain, as are ethnic Europeans and any person, regardless of immigration status or country of origin, who took an active part with the Confederate forces during the war. Certain professionals, namely doctors and engineers, will also not face deportation. Any alien who falls under these latter provisions should immediately contact his local militia or his state's provisional government, who will provide the proper verification forms…

Mexican Press Service

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The Government of Mexico was joined by spokespersons from the United States and the Catholic and Lutheran Churches today in condemning this racist act of the Confederate Government in no uncertain terms.

"*We will not tolerate this abuse of our citizens!" the Mexican President declared before the crowd of thousands gathered to hear his pronouncement, and threatened the CSA with unspecified responses…*

Internet Blog, Alabama

If they're citizens of Mexico, what the hell are they doing here?

Internet Whistleblower

The following communication from Bishop O'Reilly was forwarded to this office by a Catholic Church official on the condition of anonymity. This is the gist of it.

"*While the Church deplores this new law affecting the free migration of people, we recognize that it is still the law, and all dioceses must obey it. After all, the Church cannot serve the people if its properties are seized and its priests deported…"*

The Lutheran, Presbyterian, and several other denominations have also reportedly sent out similar notifications, ordering their various churches to obey the law, while most of the smaller independent congregations in the CSA already actively support it…

Moscow, Russia

"Frank! Sammie!"

For a small man, Tommy Richardson had quite a voice, and it echoed across the airport easily enough for Frank's sensitive ears to make it out from fifty yards away, even over the noise of the huge crowd of thousands of Russians who had turned out to see their country's visitors, despite them already having an official welcome in Saint Petersburg earlier in the day. Stopping abruptly, and forcing Sammie, with Linda in her arms, their two-person entourage of Cynthia and Billy, and their much larger formation of Russian guards to come to a halt as well, Frank swiveled his head and caught sight of him and a familiar brown-haired girl waving both hands and jumping up and down beside him like she was on a pogo stick.

"Look!" he shouted over the noise, and Samantha squealed with delight and waved back when she saw them.

"Tommy! Donna!"

Turning to the captain in charge of the guard unit, Frank spoke to him in Russian, "Those two back there are my friends; would you please send someone after them, and have them escorted to our limo before we leave?"

The officer gave a curt nod and said, "Da," before giving the order, and a pair of soldiers split off and began cutting through the crowd, even as the rest of their unit closed in tighter, filling the space they had left. When Frank thanked him, he responded with a tight smile that couldn't hide his nervousness. The airport was reasonably secure, but these guests of his country were very important, and he knew it was more than his career – and most likely his ass – was worth if something were to happen to them, and in a crowd, that was always a possibility.

"They will bring them, General; now please, we need to get out of here."

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"Understood," Frank responded and began walking again, slipping his left arm around Samantha's waist, instinctively keeping his right hand free.

Having less of a crowd to fight their way through while moving away, the prodigal pair was already waiting for them in the back seat when they finally reached the armored black limousine. Samantha was promptly lodged halfway in the door by Donna grabbing and hugging her while she still had one foot on the pavement.

"Please General!" they heard the worried Russian Captain pleading from outside, "Please get in the car!"

Frank understood, and put one hand on the most conveniently and pleasantly accessible part of his wife that was still outside, eliciting a startled, "Oh!" before half-encouraging, half gently but firmly pushing her inside, allowing the grateful officer to finally slam the door of the armored vehicle while breathing a sigh of relief.

They were well underway before the hugging and handshaking stopped between the Gores, their bodyguards and their friends.

When Tommy let go of Frank's hand, Frank glanced down at it in surprise.

"You're getting your grip back!"

"You're damned right!" the little biker-turned-Confederate officer told him, holding up both hands and opening and closing them repeatedly to prove his point, "I'm up to about sixty-five percent now, and the doctors predict that, within a year, I'll be at eighty or ninety. I may never play the piano again, but…"

"You never played the piano the first time, twerp!" Billy exclaimed, hugging his best friend once more, tears of joy shining in his eyes. "Damn, that's good to hear!"

"We've got some more good news," Donna said, smiling a little uncertainly before holding up her left hand to display a wedding band that hadn't been there when they left.

Samantha and Cynthia both squealed like schoolgirls at the sight, and little Linda squealed too; she didn't know what for, but everyone else was doing it, so she figured she might as well too.

"When?" Samantha managed to blurt out, and Donna told her a month ago.

"Congratulations," Frank told them sincerely, "but why didn't you get word to us?"

"I…I was afraid you all would be mad at me…especially Uncle Sam."

Frank and Samantha looked at each other, then back at her.

"Mad?" Samantha asked, "Whatever for?"

Donna looked down for a moment, gathering her thoughts, the raised her eyes to her friends once more.

"I know…I mean I think you all would have wanted to be there…"

"You know we would have," Samantha told her, "but we couldn't leave the war, so I'm happy for you just the same."

"Yeah, but Uncle Sam..."

Frank broke in. "Your Uncle Sam will be tickled to death that you two finally did the right thing and got married, whichever way it happened. That's been worrying him for a long time, ever since Columbia."

"I know, but still…"

"But still nothing," Samantha told her, and then her eyes slid her eyes down the girl's body. "You're pregnant too, aren't you?"

Donna swallowed hard.

"Yeah."

There was a bit more hugging and congratulating, and Billy reached over and made fanning motions as if trying to cool down Tommy's crotch until his friend uttered a half-hearted obscenity and swatted the big paw away. Frank asked her how far along she was, and she smiled.

"As nearly as we can figure, it happened about the same time Sammie got pregnant."

"Donna told me about you all setting up that party for me and drugging me, once my hands were fixed," Tommy added, "and it embarrassed the hell out of me, but I owe you all a big thank you for it!"

"You're more than welcome, and you know it; I'll just be glad to have you back. So, did you go before the justice of the peace over here, or what?"

"No," Donna said, "Victoria's people that we're staying with set us up with a wedding in this absolutely beautiful and really huge Russian Orthodox Church."

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"I thought you had to be a member of Orthodox Church for that."

"You do," Tommy told him, "We converted. It was the only church around, and we started going, and… well, I reckon my dad is going to be pretty pissed."

They laughed at the understatement. Tommy's father was a Southern Baptist minister who had his denomination's principled dislike of all things Catholic, a category in which Orthodoxy definitely fell.

"It's still Christian," Frank told him firmly, "and while your dad might not like it, I reckon that's all that matters as far as God's concerned. For what it's worth, I think you…no, I *know* you did the right thing!" He grinned. "If Sam starts grumping, just tell him he's going to be a Godfather again, and he'll straighten right up!"

"He does love children."

"And some 'children' that are a little older too," Samantha said, obviously speaking of herself, "I've always felt sad for him because he didn't have any of his own."

Billy snorted, "The old fart has you *all* in his stable, so I figure he ain't got nothin' to complain about!"

"So," Frank asked, chuckling at the blunt truth of that statement, "are you going to tour with us?"

Tommy shook his head.

"No, this is your moment of glory. Besides, I'm still doing therapy. You two go ahead and enjoy yourselves."

"You're surely going to come to the hotel with us this evening, at least for a while?"

"They're coming," Samantha said definitely, leaving no room for argument as she winked at Donna, "We've got a lot of catching up to do."

Richmond Courier

Massive rioting broke out in the city this evening as illegal aliens, led by Mexican and Salvadoran street gangs, began burning, looting and attacking both civilians and police. Provisional Governor William "Wild Bill" Joyce called up the Virginia Militia immediately, but five innocent people were killed, seventeen raped, sixty-eight injured, and millions of dollars worth of damage was done before they arrived a half-hour later in numbers sufficient to back up law enforcement and the groups of private, armed citizens aiding them in an attempt to suppress the chaos.

Despite coming under more or less continuous sniper fire by the Hispanic gang members, the combat veterans of our Militia quickly surrounded the area, completely sealing it off before moving in and closing the noose. Governor Joyce had no choice but to authorize the use of deadly force against any rioter with a gun, bomb, or any other weapon, and the gangsters and fire-bombers quickly proved to be no match for the Old Dominion's professional marksmen, who neutralized them in short order, allowing a joint force of their comrades and law enforcement to move in with tear gas and nightsticks to pacify the area. Forty-eight combatants were killed and an unknown number wounded. Everyone involved was arrested, in excess of 4000 individuals, all of whom – including a handful of Southern turncoats – are currently being held at an undisclosed location, and will be subject to immediate deportation once the murderers, rapists and looters are separated out for trial and punishment by Virginia's Revolutionary Government.

Similar riots broke out in Atlanta, Charlotte and Houston, all with similar results; they were put down quick and put down hard by a coalition of law enforcement, state militia, and citizens, and the disposition of all involved will be the same as in Virginia. The decision was lauded by Acting President Edge and Acting Vice President MacFie.

"*This is not the United States," Vice President MacFie declared, "This is the Confederate States of America, and we believe in the rule of law. This sort of violence will not be tolerated under any circumstances, particularly by those who have no business here in the first place. The citizens of this country have an a right to be secure in their homes, businesses, and the streets their tax dollars pay for, and they will have that security, whatever the cost to the criminals, predators, and parasites who would*

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take it away!”

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DAY 965

CHAPTER 32

Russia

Frank looked at his wife walking beside him along the glittering winter wonderland of the broad, Saint Petersburg street, and at Linda cradled on her hip, blond curls blowing from under her toboggan in the cold breeze, looking as goggle-eyed and rosy-cheeked as a fairy in little pink coat, and he smiled at seeing both their smiles. *God, how much I love them!* Protected by two layers of security – first Billy and Cynthia half a step behind and to either side of them, and a company-sized Cossack honor guard encircling them – they were all happy and relaxed.

No wonder! he thought to himself. The Confederacy of Native American Nations and Japan had both been very nice, but Russia was simply wonderful. They had been whisked all over the country in the past two weeks, alternating between reviewing troops and military hardware – the latter of which the Russians were hopeful of selling to the Confederacy – and checking out the beauty spots, from the desolate, endless snowy Taiga where they got to see Siberian tigers in the wild to the luxurious Black Sea coast. It was a huge land and a beautiful one, and the people…

Samantha was thinking about that even as she waved at the massive crowd swirling around their military perimeter while Linda watched the excitement, snuggled in her arms and waving her own little mittened hands at all and sundry.

I'm glad I was around Vika for awhile before coming!

Outwardly many Russians seemed rather grim, humorless, and more than a little abrupt, but once you were close to them, their reserve usually fell away until they were as outgoing and fun-loving as the Southerners she was used to, and just as hospitable – maybe even more so. They had been treated to dinner after dinner, until Samantha was sure she had gained at least five pounds since their arrival that had absolutely nothing to do with her advancing double pregnancy. Not all of them were state affairs with dignitaries either; on a couple of occasions, they had followed their instincts and unexpectedly accepted dinner invitations from ordinary people who had managed to reach them – an apartment dwelling family in Moscow and a rural Don Cossack clan – and, even though the food might not have been quite as elaborate, there was plenty and it was homey and good and enthusiastically forced on them. Of course, it was helped along by the fact that Frank, who always researched to be one step ahead of anything that might conceivably come up, had packed several bottles of premium Kentucky and Tennessee whiskey to present as the expected symbolic gifts to the hosts from the guests that Russian custom demanded. That, plus the enormous quantities of vodka and champagne already provided, tended to really get the party started.

I might be missing out of that last part because I'm pregnant, but from the amount I'd be expected to drink otherwise, that might be a good thing!

In part because of their alliance, and in part because of their willingness to interact with the ordinary Russian people, their popularity had grown like wildfire, as evidenced by the cheering throng surrounding them now, and, to all appearances, exuding nothing but good will.

Frank would later wonder if it was his overworked guardian angel, his police experience, or his own battle-honed sixth sense that pulled his gaze in the right direction at the right time during the chaos, and made him recognize the look on the man's face. Thousands were gathered around them, pressing as closely as the guards would allow, and yet one slightly swarthy face stood out amongst them all. As Frank's eyes passed across the crowd only a few yards away from them, looking between the shoulders of two of the Cossacks,

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they met another pair – wide, glaring, and intense – and instinctively locked on them, recognizing their peculiar stare for what it was, and what the right hand slipping inside the thick, fur-collared coat meant.

Most men would have been worried about public reaction or looking like a fool, enough to have slowed them down for that one critical fraction of a second, but Frank wasn't most men; he had been out on the sharp end far too recently and far too long for that. His instinct triggered, he slipped instantly into his zone.

"Down!" he shouted even as he jumped between the gunman and his family, his right hand streaking for his .45.

The man at the edge of the crowd drew a Tokarev pistol and fired.

Samantha had been well trained, and had been out there on the edge for a long time herself. At her husband's command, she instantly dropped without stopping to look for the source of the threat, cradling Linda in her right arm to protect her as she caught herself on her left hand, barely feeling the shock of the impact and not even noticing the skin shredding and ripping off her palm as it skidded on the rough pavement. Crouched low on her knees and elbows protectively over her child, her right hand let go and reached for her purse and the revolver that was concealed there. She heard the Tokarev fire, but never knew the same round that passed within an inch of her husband also cut a path through the space her own head had been occupying a split-second before. Suddenly guns were firing from several places in the crowd, filling the air with bangs and screams. Oddly enough, despite the rising cacophony of noise, she could clearly hear the meaty impact of the round, and someone crying out.

"Watch your side!" Billy yelled, already swiveling his favorite weapon forward from its hiding place beneath his generously-cut sport coat. The 'whip-it gun' had been popularized by Depression-era gangsters: a twelve gauge semi-automatic shotgun with the barrel cut off just ahead of its extended magazine, its trigger and pistol grip assembly moved forward and the original butt stock replaced with a curved metal plate bolted directly to the rear of the action. The plate was fitted with a leather loop that fit around his massive shoulder and allowed the weapon to be worn beneath a jacket, dangling beneath the arm ready for use. His speed enhanced by practice and adrenaline, it seemed to appear as if by magic, shouldered and ready to fire.

"Got it!" Cynthia yelled even as she pivoted, turning her back to him, her own pistol ready in both hands as she scanned the opposite direction. She knew he would take care of things on his side, and she would rather be dead and damned than fail on hers.

A young Russian soldier sprang forward and deliberately threw himself in front of Frank, trying to protect the General even as he tried to bring his own weapon into play, only to take the assassin's second and third rounds in the body and face. He staggered and then fell aside, and Frank, his pistol already drawn, fired.

Two rounds from his old 1911 .45 punctured the killer's chest, but the second had barely cleared the muzzle when two more soldiers' AK47s opened up at point blank range on the wounded man as well, and a roaring blast from Billy's shotgun discharging almost beside Frank's ear blew most of the attacker's face off. The torn body fell backwards in a bloody ruin, but still more automatic weapons fire was roaring from various places throughout the area. Frank backpedaled, trying to get closer to Samantha and Linda, and keep himself between them and danger, but there was danger all around.

The Russian soldiers were returning fire with a vengeance, and the crowd surged as people screamed and shoved frantically, trying to get out of the way. There was an explosion as a grenade detonated somewhere in the mass of spectators to Frank's left, then, from the crowd directly in front of him, somewhere behind the shot-up body of the man he had helped kill, something arced up and came down towards them.

Frank didn't recognize the model, but he knew a hand grenade when he saw one.

If he had had time to think, he might never have done it, but just then, it seemed to be the most natural thing in the world to jump up, catch the hand-sized bomb like a thrown ball and, with a quick circular motion of his arm, send it winging back in the direction it had come. Frank had played baseball in high school, and his old skills came back to him when he needed them most. The grenade unerringly returned to its startled sender and exploded in the air right in front of his face, decapitating him and sending shrapnel flying.

The soldiers closed protectively around the Confederates to shield them from fire, or at least tried to. The one in front of Cynthia jerked at the impact of a burst of automatic fire from an unseen attacker, and dropped like a stone. As his body fell, the petite bodyguard caught the impression of someone in civilian clothes

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holding a Kalashnikov, and squeezed the trigger of her pistol twice, putting him down with one 9mm slug in the liver and a second through the heart.

Frank reached his wife and dropped to one knee beside her, trying to keep as much of himself as he could between her and Linda and any hostile fire coming from his side. Unfortunately, it was coming from all sides.

Glaring out from between the legs of the Russian soldier standing with his back to her not even two feet away, Samantha saw a rifle's muzzle rising from the crowd, but the Cossack was twisted to the left, addressing a possible target in that direction with a three-round burst, and didn't see it. Knowing it was up to her, she pointed and fired one handed, and hit the Chechen in the groin, the hollow point breaking his pelvis in addition to shredding his flesh, making him drop in place like an accordion folding up. At the loud noise and very palpable discharge of hot gasses abruptly coming from directly between his own legs, just below his crotch, the startled soldier jumped, then glanced from the terrorist to Sammie, shouted something in Russian that sounded profanely congratulatory, and flashed a split second smile of approval when he realized what she had done.

The firing was still going on, but it was moving away from them now, as more and more Russian troops scattered around the area charged in, forcing their way through into the rapidly thinning crowd, and the military snipers on the rooftops found more targets. Now the primary sound was Linda screaming in fear, the noise she was making almost drowned out by the wounded in the crowd crying out in pain.

Caught in the crossfire, the casualties lay everywhere, and blood ran thick in scarlet rivulets and gathered around the bodies in broad pools on the pavement. Someone shouted an order and still more soldiers closed in around Frank, Samantha, Billy, and Cynthia like a massive rugby scrum, only facing outwards in a solid wall of muscle and weapons half a dozen men deep. In the relative safety of the center, Frank pulled his wife to her feet, and they were quickly hustled to safety.

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CHAPTER 33

Confederate News Bulletin

The rumor that General and Mrs. Gore have been assassinated is false; I repeat, false. Our sources have confirmed that Mrs. Gore was slightly wounded during the terrorist attack less than an hour ago, but she, her daughter, and her unborn child, along with her husband, are safe and sound.

That may be more than can be said about Confederate relations with Russia, who allowed something like this to take place on their soil…

"General, I cannot apologize enough for this...this *outrage*!"

Frank, still pumped with anger and adrenaline an hour after the attack ground his teeth as he fought for control. He looked at Cynthia, bouncing his finally calm daughter on her lap, and at the doctor wrapping the bandage covering the scrapes on his wife's hand.

My God, Sammie and Linda nearly...

Another thought came to him.

But they didn't! Thank you, God, they didn't!

Turning his attention back to the livid Prime Minister and wondering if the furious man was going to have a stroke right there on the spot, Frank shook his head and, when it came, his voice was tight and hard but calm.

"There's no need for apologies, sir; you weren't the ones who carried out the attack. In fact, if it weren't for your soldiers, we wouldn't be alive right now. Have you figured out who it was yet?"

Nodding, the angry Russian reached back without looking and took a single glass of clear vodka from his orderly, who already had it ready for him, along with a second one for Frank. The Prime Minister simply slugged his down, and Frank felt like doing the same, but restrained himself, sipping at it instead. He'd never been used to drinking much at one time, and he knew there was no way he'd keep up glass for glass with his host. He needed to keep his wits about him, although it would be so easy to drown both them and the stress of what had almost happened.

I want the sons of bitches who did this!

"We know they were Chechen terrorists," the Prime Minister was saying, "We've positively identified three of them, but there were too many, and they were too well equipped and their attack too well organized for them to have acted alone. They have neither the infrastructure nor the style. Besides, their favorite technique is a bombing, which is usually a more practical but somewhat impersonal method. A bomb is, how do you say it in your country, addressed 'to whom it may concern.' Whoever set this up intended it to be *very* personal, and wanted to make sure everyone knew unmistakably that *you* were the target.

"CIA?" Frank asked, feeling the anger building inside, much hotter than the vodka burning his throat as he put the glass to his lips once more. The Prime Minister shrugged.

"We think so, but we should know something for sure shortly. We took three of them alive, including the one your wife shot the balls off of."

Frank noticed the Russian's tone of voice clearly expressed his satisfaction in the anatomical alteration of the attacker, and Frank couldn't truthfully say he felt any sympathy, either for that, or for what the prisoners were almost certainly going through right now. Russia's history had been long and hard, and as a result they had little squeamishness and few qualms when it came to their enemies. Considering that those particular enemies had just tried to do, the Southerner had few qualms himself.

Frank Gore had discovered something within himself through the course of the War: namely that love and hate went hand and hand. The stronger your love for something, the stronger your hate was toward anyone who would hurt it. He could live with people trying to kill him – enough of them had certainly tried – but this particular attack was designed to hurt his people by weakening their bond with their strongest ally, and to kill

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his wife and daughter. Frank had a deep and abiding love for his people, and a deeper and still more abiding one for his family, and his hatred for those trying to harm them was just as strong and long-lasting.

The orderly's cell phone rang, a subdued sound designed to attract little attention but his own. After putting it against his ear and listening for a moment, he extended it to his boss. The Prime Minister grabbed it and pressed it to his ear. He grunted, "Da?" repeating the several times, apparently in response to the information he was receiving and then began talking. Although Frank's Russian was passable, once the man began speaking, the General didn't have to know the language to recognize that the leader was having a quiet yet very serious cussing fit. The Prime Minister finished with a curt order and shoved the phone back at his imperturbable aide before addressing Frank once more, and waving away another proffered glass. Frank did the same.

"It was organized in Kosovo in the offices of the Kosovo Liberation Army and funded by the American Central Intelligence Agency in collusion with the Israeli Mossad.

Frank whistled in surprise, not so much at the information itself, but rather at the speed with which the Russians had acquired it.

"That was quick. I'm surprised that a foot soldier would know that much."

"He knew enough to make a chain." He took a pace, then turned back to face Frank. "We found out from the prisoners that part of them came from Kosovo, and that one of them had seen an American and a Jew there, both known intelligence agents, in a meeting with KLA leader Ibrahim Abazi and Chechen terrorist Muhammad Abdul. Following the meeting in Abdul's office, the terrorists and their weapons were smuggled in from Pristina by a Russian Jewish mafia family led by Boris Rabinovich, who has long been suspected to have done work for Mossad. A squad of Spetsnaz took him and most of his family and retainers into custody not five minutes ago, and we'll get the particulars from him *very* shortly. You may rest assured that this insult to you and to Russia will not go un-addressed!"

Frank nodded his approval. From the look on the Prime Minister's face, he was going to address the hell out of it.

"Sir," Samantha said quietly, and the Russian leader's head instantly swiveled toward her. "Do you have any word on the soldiers who were wounded defending us?"

Frank added, "Especially the one who threw himself in front of my family and me?"

The startled Prime Minister looked at them from one to the other, blinking with surprise at the change of subject. This wasn't the reaction he had learned to expect for foreign dignitaries, who merely took such sacrifices as their due. He actually didn't know how the wounded men were himself, but his efficient orderly had the information ready.

"One is dead, sir, two others were slightly wounded, and the one General Gore inquired about is still in surgery at the military hospital."

"Does the one in the hospital have any family?" Samantha asked, and the orderly told her to please wait a moment, and he would check. After another brief cell phone conversation, he turned back to her.

"He was an orphan, but he has grandparents; they were in town when it happened. They were actually there in the crowd at the time of the incident, and suffered minor injuries when they were knocked down in the resulting panic. They are both waiting at the hospital now."

She looked at her husband, and, as happened increasingly often, they seemed to read one another's thoughts. He nodded, smiled and faced the Prime Minister.

"We'd like to ask a few favors."

The Russian leader felt slightly sick, as if he'd been punched in the gut. No doubt these favors would be big and expensive ones, and, considering what had just happened on his country's soil, unless they were completely outrageous, he would be obligated to grant them as a way of making up for the dignity he and his people had lost. Still, he put the best face on it he could.

"Please, by all means!"

As Frank outlined what he wanted, the Prime Minister's eyes grew wider still.

These are not the kind of foreigners I'm used to at all!

Impulsively, unable to contain his joy, he hugged both of them at once, an arm tightly around each, slapping

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their backs enthusiastically before letting go. After all, what they were about to do would be of immense benefit to his country, and he loved his people just as much as they did theirs.

Russian News Service

While still nursing their own wounds from the cowardly terrorist attack only hours before, Confederate General Franklin Gore and his lovely wife, Press Secretary Samantha Gore, insisted on visiting the Russian soldiers wounded in the battle. The two spent several hours sitting with the grandparents of Corporal Mikhail Puskin while he was in surgery, fighting for his life. The heroic 20 year-old had thrown his own body in front of Russia's honored guests, and been wounded twice. Once he had recovered and regained consciousness, the pair visited him at his hospital bedside, where General Gore took the Confederate Medal of Valor from his own uniform and pinned it on Corporal Puskin, making the young soldier the first Russian to be so decorated by the Confederate States of America.

Following that, they visited the parents and widow of Private Goncharov, who was killed during the action, and paid their respects, bringing flowers for the fallen hero. General Gore gave a brief speech, in which he said the following:

"*I want to thank the Russian soldiers for their courage and professionalism, without which my child, my wife, and I would all almost certainly have been killed. Neither we, nor, I suspect, the Confederacy, will ever forget what happened here today, or the sacrifices made by our friends.*

"*To the terrorists, and especially to the ones who back them, know this. We sought no war with you. We sought no harm to you, or to interfere in your affairs. You would have found us a much better friend than the enemy you have chosen to make us. You've made your bed, as far as the Confederacy is concerned, and now you can lie in it; if I have anything to say about it, you won't be getting much restful sleep there.*

"*You should also know you have not driven a wedge between the Confederate States of America and the Russian Federation; instead, you have drawn us closer together than ever. We fought side by side, and shed blood together, and that makes for a camaraderie and brotherhood that cowards like you will never know, something only the brave can understand, a bond that will not easily be broken. Rest assured, we know who our friends are, and you'd better believe we also know our enemies! We will treat each accordingly."*

This speech, along with their actions, both in fighting alongside our soldiers, and in their humility and humanity they have displayed, have clinched the famous couple's status as the darlings of the Russian people. In a final touching ceremony, Corporal Puskin's grandfather, Ivan, presented General Gore with a Cossack saber that had been in his family for generations. The General was obviously moved by the gesture.

"*This is a fine blade," he said, "from a fine family of a fine people. I give you my word of honor to always try to be worthy of it."*

He also offered all the soldiers wounded defending them and their families an expenses-paid vacation in the CSA, courtesy of the Confederate Government.

In related news, the surviving Chechen terrorists and the organized criminal gang who backed them have revealed to our interrogators that the plot to kill General and Mrs. Gore and their child, and to discredit Russia in the process, originated in Kosovo, with direct instigation, backing and funding by the Israeli Mossad and American CIA. Our representative to the United Nations has already filed a formal complaint...

"What are you going to do, Frank?"

Frank smiled tightly, sitting on the edge of his bed in the luxurious hotel room. He could hear the concern in President Edge's voice, and he couldn't really say he blamed him. After all, the attack had been all over the news as a top headline, which had no doubt caused as much turmoil back home in the Confederacy as it had

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here. If the President had any idea what it was Frank would ask, that would cause concern as well, because he was about to ask a lot.

"Unless you can guarantee this line is secure, I can't tell you that."

On the other end, Edge frowned. No line could be presumed to be totally secure, although this was probably as close as they were likely to come. Still, his Secretary of Defense had to have a reason for being so secretive, and he wished like hell he had an inkling as to what it was.

"You know good and well I can't promise that."

"Then I can't tell you, because if I do, I won't be able to do it. If they find out what I'm up to, they'll queer the deal at the very least, and quite possibly make a more successful attempt at killing us this time. Sammie's and Linda's lives are both on the line here as well as mine, and I intend to minimize the risk."

"Can you at least give me a hint?" Suddenly Edge's heart gave a little jump. "You're not going to do anything to start a war, are you?" Frank was solid, the most solid man he knew, but he still couldn't discount the potential out of hand either, especially since the attempt on his own life had also nearly taken that of Samantha and Linda. He still remembered Sam describing how Frank had rammed his .45 automatic straight through the front teeth of one of Samantha's torturers and into the woman's mouth, and pulled the trigger – twice! Nothing, no act whatsoever, no matter how violent, could truly be said to be beyond the pale with him when it came to his family. Not that Edge blamed him, of course – *That would definitely be the pot calling the kettle black!* – but now, such an act could and almost certainly would have negative repercussions that their fledgling government was not at all prepared to deal with.

"No, no," Frank assured him, "I just need permission to run a little diplomacy, that's all."

"Diplomacy you can't tell me about?"

"Exactly, because if I do..."

"You won't be able to do it."

"Bingo."

"You know, after what happened, I'd be a hell of a lot more comfortable if you all would just come home like I asked."

"That would make the Confederacy look weak. I don't intend to go running home like a whipped dog at the first sign of trouble, and let those sons of bitches gloat about how they ran us out of Russia. I plan to come back with something concrete to show for all this, both to make Dixie look good *and* powerful, and to rub the noses of Israel and the US right in it."

"You're sure they're the ones behind it, then?"

"The Russians are sure, and they're the ones doing the interrogations. They've got names, dates, places, the works."

Edge tightly grinned, and began telling his friend and subordinate something he was sure the younger man already knew, but he had to say anyway.

"I'm not saying they're lying, but the Russians also have some things to gain by making us believe that."

"I know that, but the evidence does point in that direction."

"You're the one over there on the ground; what does your gut say?"

"It says they're giving us the straight info."

"We fought a good bit of the war relying on those instincts of yours, and we won then, so I suppose we'll go with it this time." He sighed. "So, what exactly is it you want me to do?"

"Give me permission to run some diplomacy."

"That you can't tell me about beforehand."

"Right."

Edge blew out his breath in frustration. He knew he was taking one hell of a chance…but this was Frank.

Damn it, I hope I'm not getting soft!

"You've been around Sam too long; you're getting as irritating as he is sometimes. Okay, as long as you don't start any wars and don't make any enormous monetary commitments we can't afford, run your diplomacy. Just remember while you're doing it that the public opinion of the people here in the Confederacy is what matters most right now, and *right now*, most of them are scared half to death for you and your family,

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and want you to come home."

"We'll be home as soon as the job's done."

After he hung up, the Russian intelligence officer intercepting his message on the way out and the one from the CIA, intercepting it on the way in, both quickly dashed off messages to their immediate superiors. Neither of them knew what the hell Frank was up to, but only the CIA man found it troubling.

"It's time to clean our house, once and for all," Sam told the assembled Congressmen, meeting in closed emergency session without even their secretaries present, and with no recording equipment running. The meeting was hurried and informal, as evidenced by the cloud of cigar, cigarette, and pipe smoke that hung over the table. "Our enemies have just shown their faces, and have just given us the excuse we need; the deliberate attack on General Gore's diplomatic mission was nothing less than an act of war by all parties involved."

"I agree completely," Jack Boggess said, the anger over what had happened hours before still seething in his voice. *I don't have so many friends that I'll let some son of a bitch try to kill one of my best ones and get away with it.* "What do you have in mind?"

Sam told them, and then waited for the pandemonium to subside. It took awhile.

"Do you realize who you're talking about?" Congressman Garvey of Florida almost shouted, only to have his volume topped by Congressman Ritchie of Alabama, who loudly declared, "The Evangelicals will literally shit bricks!"

Edge opened his mouth to put in his two cents, but Dr. MacFie beat him to it, hammering on the table with the Mississippi plaque marking his place to get their attention.

"Let them. I mean it, let them! The Jewish sons of bitches have been behind every last organization that has historically opposed the South and everything it stands for! They've been a thorn in our side for decades, and we're fools if we don't get rid of at least some of them when we have the opportunity!"

"We can't target Israel!" Garvey insisted, and Edge shrugged.

"We didn't target Israel; Israel targeted us – repeatedly – and now they're going to pay the price for it. We're not singling them out, but merely treating them like everyone else involved, just as any other country, with no special favoritism. It's better than they deserve."

North Carolina's Congressman McDonald, trying to be the voice of reason, said, "Look, the Muslims we can get by with, since nobody likes them anyway, but…"

"We can get by with anything we damned well please," Boggess interrupted, "Who the hell is going to tell us we can't?"

"The people might, come the election."

That caused a slight pause, enough for Jonathon Edge to jump back in.

"That election is almost six years away. You know how short the electorate's attention span is; by that time, whatever we do right now will be old news, water under the bridge. If we've got something unpleasant or unpopular to do, *right now* is the time to do it. At the moment the people are angry enough to back us in anything against everyone behind this, and we need to stir up that wave of rage and ride it all the way. If we're seen as doing nothing, I can guarantee people will remember that, because whoever runs against us will keep reminding them. We might not be able to do much about the US at the moment, since it's right next door, but but need to give a 'left foot rocket' to the others in spades. We play the propaganda game right, we'll come out smelling like a rose. After all, we met violence against two of the greatest, most well-known heroes of the Confederacy and their little child with a non-violent response, and that's the way we'll present it and keep presenting it to our people. Considering the lies they accepted from the US for years, I'm confident we can make them accept the truth from us."

"Besides," Dr. MacFie added, "who here wants to be seen standing up for the people who tried to murder Frank Gore, his pregnant wife and his little baby? Anyone?" He pointedly looked around the room until he was sure everyone understood that his question was not rhetorical, and not advice; it was a direct threat. Every man there realized that was exactly the way MacFie, and Edge, the two most powerful and most listened-to Southern leaders, would depict *any* opposition to this proposal in the media. That would be political – and, as rabidly popular as the Gores, Dixie's unofficial 'first family,' were among the people, quite

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possibly physical – suicide. Gray beard bristling furiously as his sharp eyes swung back and forth, MacFie nodded his satisfaction. “All right then. I make a motion that we bring this proposal to a vote…”

Confederate States of America Congress

Due to acts of terrorism on the part of Kosovo, Chechnya and Israel against the diplomatic agents of the Confederate States of America, the Confederacy is severing all diplomatic ties with those nations. All assets from those countries currently within the Confederacy shall be immediately seized, and all citizens of those countries shall depart the Confederate States of America within ten days. Anyone eligible for dual citizenship in the Confederacy and in any of the aforementioned countries or in the United States, who wishes to remain within our borders shall immediately and formally renounce the said foreign citizenship within the allotted ten day period if they wish to remain…

Internet Discussion Forum

Star_of_David said: *Do you realize what they’ve done? These Southern bigots have targeted ever single Jew in this false Confederacy of theirs for expulsion! Every Jew is, after all, automatically a citizen of Israel, and they are being forced either to abandon their homes or abandon their Jewish identity! This is the Nazis all over again, persecuting us for no other reason than that we’re Jews!*

Uncommon_Sense said: *Yeah, that and the fact the Israeli government just backed an unprovoked assassination attempt against one of their leaders in an attempt to destabilize their country…*

G_ds_Chosen said: *Only an anti-Semite would say something like that! You’re trying to bring back the gas chambers!*

Hammertime said: *Read the article, douche bag; the Confederates aren’t throwing the Jews out! All they’re saying is that there will be no Israeli, Kosovar, or Chechen citizens allowed here, nor any dual citizenship with people from those countries or from the US. You’ve got to make a choice as to which country you’re loyal to, and to stay in the South, you have to be loyal to the South. That doesn’t sound unreasonable to me; in fact, it sounds like damned good sense. I wish our country would do that.*

Uncommon_Sense said: *Really, Hammer. Besides, isn’t that a hell of a lot better deal than the Israelis gave the Palestinians whose land they stole?*

Star_of_David said: *YOU’RE ALL A BUNCH OF MOTHER****ING NAZIS! I HOPE YOU ALL DIE!*

Confederate News Service

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The Confederacy held its breath when it was learned that General Frank Gore, his wife Samantha and her unborn twins, daughter Linda, and their longtime comrades and executive assistants, Cynthia Dover and Billy Sprouse, had come under attack by Islamic terrorists while on a diplomatic tour of Russia: a brutal, cowardly action that also left at least twelve innocent people dead and scores wounded. The terrorists apparently didn't know who they were dealing with this time, and were too used to targeting little children and unarmed civilians who can't shoot back, rather than battle-hardened Southern warriors. All four of our people, along with their Russian escort, immediately returned fire, counterattacking and quickly killing over a dozen terrorists, and wounding and capturing several more. The photographs that caught our General snatching that grenade out of the air and throwing it right back at the surprised terrorist, and the one of his courageous wife returning fire even as she sheltered their child beneath her are predicted to become iconic images, and are already being marketed on the Internet in poster and tee shirt form.

Press Secretary Samantha Gore suffered a wound to her left hand during the battle, but it didn't stop her from fighting, bringing down at least one of the terrorists armed with a fully-automatic assault rifle, using nothing but her revolver even as she protected little Linda with her own body. She insists it's nothing but a scrape, but then what else would we expect from our country's most notable heroine? She can rest assured she's on the prayer list of more than one church tonight!

Following the violent attack, President Edge immediately asked that they return home for their own safety, but they respectfully refused.

"*We'll be home as soon as the job's done," General Gore said firmly, adding that he had no intention of shaming the Confederacy by "running home like a whipped dog at the first sign of trouble."*

The General went on to praise the courage and competence of the Russian soldiers, and made it a point to visit and thank the ones who were wounded, as well as the families of those who died. He also put the Chechen terrorists, along with their Kosovar, US and Israeli backers operating out of the terrorist haven of Kosovo, and anyone else who would attack Confederate citizens anywhere in the world, on notice:

"*Rest assured, we know who are friends are, and you'd better believe we also know our enemies! You strike one of us, you strike us all!"*

In a special late night session called for the purpose, Congress voted unanimously to completely sever diplomatic relations with those countries, seize all Israeli, Chechen and Kosovar assets in the Confederacy, expel all their citizens here, and to issue a statement of condemnation of the trio of terrorist states, along with the United States. President Jonathon Edge added his own warning.

"*The Confederate States of America has used restraint. Even though a military response to this act of violent, naked terrorism against diplomats, pregnant women and little babies would be fully justified, since no Southerners died, we have decided to meet it with sanctions…this time! I can assure you that this will be the only time! Anyone, anywhere, who attempts any further harm to our diplomats here or overseas should be prepared to immediately go to war with the Confederate States of America, because we will consider it an act of war, and we will respond accordingly!"*

After voicing his agreement, Vice President Andrew MacFie went on to describe the Gores' actions as the perfect example of courage and duty for the Southern people to take note of and aspire to. With the pictures of General and Mrs. Gore in action projected on the wall behind him, he pointed at them and said, "See that? Well take heed and remember, because that is what it means to be a Southerner!"

The reaction of the people across the Confederacy has been nothing short of tremendous. Here are a few of the many thousands of phone calls this studio has received.

"*Did you see that? We don't have some rear-echelon desk jockey for a Secretary of Defense; by God, we've got a man!"*

"*My heart was clear up in my throat when I saw that footage of Samantha Gore, holding her baby in one hand and firing with the other. She's the Dixie Boudiccia!"*

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"*My God, he just jumped up, snatched that grenade, and threw it back like he was playing catch, just as calm as you please! I was in two wars, and I ain't never seen anything like that in my life!"*

"*I've always hated the Russians, but after I saw that poor boy throw himself in front of our General and his family and take that bullet for them, all I can say now is God bless 'em!"*

"*I don't know about those anti-Confederate fanatics, but I do know, if I were them, that speech would scare the hell out of me, coming from Frank Gore!"*

"May I ask a favor from you, General Gore?"

"Of course, Prime Minister," Frank said politely. The *you can ask* remained unsaid but understood, and, as the Russians were beholden to him rather than the other way around, particularly since he had salvaged the relationship between the two countries despite almost being killed due to a Russian security breach, the answer depended on what was good for the Confederacy.

"May I see one of your bullets?"

Curious, Frank pulled a spare magazine from its case under his right arm in answer, thumbed a single hollow-nosed .45 round from it, and placed it in the Prime Minister's hand. The Russian rolled it between his thumb and forefinger, looking at it thoughtfully.

"I'm sure you know," he said casually, still toying with the bullet, "that we have a debt to pay in Kosovo."

"If you want my blessing, you certainly have it. You can give them a good hard kick in the ass from me while you're at it."

"Perhaps the Confederacy would like to have a little, how do you say it, a piece of this action as well."

Frank shook his head with disappointment; it was just another case of his desires colliding with cold, hard reality. "Unfortunately, our government is more than a little new, and we don't have the covert infrastructure yet to carry out that kind of an operation. Personally, if it were up to me, I'd be willing to send in a few divisions and invade the place, but..."

"Oh, it wouldn't require anything quite as ambitious as that," the Prime Minister reassured him, "I was thinking more along the lines of a surgical strike, in the form of joint operation."

Frank pursed his lips. It was tempting as hell, even though he knew the Congress would never go for it.

Still, he told himself, *it can't hurt to listen.*

"What did you have in mind?"

"No one will take credit for it directly, of course: not us and not you. But still, rumors do tend to fly, and such a thing can never be kept completely secret...even if we *wanted* to. It's a case of us not caring what *'everybody knows'* as long as *'no one can prove,'* if you take my point. We already have assets on the ground there who are ready, willing and capable of carrying out this mission, so we won't need any personnel from you. Instead, I was thinking of the Confederacy providing some logistical support, in the way of supplies, perhaps." Holding the bullet up towards the ceiling light, he turned it this way and that as he squinted at it meaningfully before looking back at Frank, the gleam in his eye surpassing that of the polished brass cartridge case. "Nothing of consequence, actually, but merely something symbolic, a token...such as a small amount of *ammunition* perhaps?"

A hard smile of understanding crept across Frank's face as he got the Russian leader's drift. The image of cooperation would prove a point to the world, but at the same time, the Russians doing it themselves would allow them to recover the face they had lost by the attack taking place on their soil. And while Frank longed to strike a blow at his attackers personally, he knew the important thing was that it was actually struck, regardless of who did it.

"Why don't you keep that bullet as a souvenir, sir? As a symbol of our cooperation in this matter."

The Prime Minister's icy smile mirrored Frank's own as he tossed the cartridge up in the air before catching it and putting it in the breast pocket of his suit. He patted the cloth over it with satisfaction. He would keep it for the rest of his life as a souvenir, because it would be a very rare thing indeed; a cartridge that

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would never be discharged, yet whose presence would fire a shot heard round the world.

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DAY 968

CHAPTER 34

Serbian News Service

In a gesture of solidarity, the Confederate heroes Frank and Samantha Gore paid a surprise visit to the Capitol in Belgrade today. The famous couple, along with their daughter and security team, were flown in unannounced on a squadron of Russian warplanes this morning, and spent much of the day meeting with the President and his ministers, along with the highest ranking officers. Immediately afterwards, our President and General Gore made a joint appearance to announce that their two countries would soon be conducting war games with one another and engaging in an officer exchange program for the purpose of expanding training, as well as promoting good will and understanding between our peoples. A major trade summit has been scheduled in the CSA Capitol of Richmond, which is expected to blunt the remaining NATO-led sanctions against our country, as well as those both threatened and currently in place against the Confederates.

Following another meeting, this time with the minority Serbian Nationalist Party leadership, the Gores took a brief tour of the capital before going to the border with the rebel province of Kosovo. There, within a few hundred meters of the NATO post, within sight of it, he made a speech, in which he gave hope to the Serbian people.

"Your land has been stolen from you, and as a Southerner, I can understand exactly how that feels. Ours was stolen from us too, but through time and effort, it eventually returned to us. It took time, more than a century and a half, but it is ours once again. Kosovo is the same. Kosovo is the heart of Serbia, stolen from you by anti-Christian powers, bent on setting up an Islamic terrorist and criminal state in the middle of Christendom. I'm here to tell you today that Kosovo will eventually be returned to you, if you want it badly enough. As long as one Serb remains to remember it, to want it, and to work for it, it will be yours. Kosovo was part of Serbia, Kosovo is part of Serbia, and Kosovo will be part of Serbia, now and forever!"

Only moments after General Gore made that speech, a series of unexplained attacks occurred in Kosovo, culminating with a massive truck bomb that exploded near KLA headquarters in Pristina, killing dozens of Kosovar and Chechen terrorists including the prominent Al Qaida masterminds Ibrahim Abazi and Muhammad Abdul, and several of their minions. A US and an Israeli citizen were reportedly killed in separate, as yet undescribed incidents. Both of them are believed to have been intelligence agents, and it has been speculated that they were among those behind the attack on the Gores in Russia. No one has claimed responsibility for the attacks, but, needless to say, NATO fingers are already pointing frantically at the Russian Federation and the Confederate States of America.

As he was getting ready to board his plane for departure, one reporter asked General Gore for his opinion on the violent events in Kosovo. He merely shrugged, smiled enigmatically, and quoted from the Bible:

"As you sow, so shall you reap," he said with a broad wink, and then boarded the plane without further comment.

As one might expect, General Gore is very popular in Serbia...

US Talk Radio Commentary

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The terrorists and war criminals Franklin and Samantha Gore have been spreading hate throughout Europe, and have left a trail of violence and death behind them. After being blocked by a group of peaceful Chechen protesters, both Gores, along with their thuggish bodyguards and Russian troops, opened fire on the unarmed crowd, indiscriminately killing and wounding dozens of people.

The infamous pair next made an appearance in Serbia, where they openly defied NATO and called for the suppression of the independent nation of Kosovo and it's re-annexation by Serbia by the means of violence. Gore is also believed to be responsible for the terrorist murders of a CIA station chief, a Kosovo Liberation official, a Chechen leader, an Israeli businessman, and over a hundred other innocent people in a series of truck bombings and sniper attacks that rocked Pristina even as he issued his statement of defiance at the border. The CIA has evidence that this reign of terror was a joint operation between the Confederates and the Russians. The United States has already filed a complaint with the United Nations, and is considering further action.

In the following five days, Gore visited Italy, where the notoriously racist Prime Minister ignored the orders from European Union officials in Brussels to exclude them. While there, he visited both the Capital and the Vatican, and had separate audiences, both with the racist, fascistPrime Minister and the notoriously anti-American Pope. His next stops were Switzerland and Ireland, spreading his poison of racism as he went. Not only did he meet with the anti-American governments of those countries, but he met with racist, anti-Semitic heads of extreme right-wing organizations from Germany, Austria, Britain, Belgium, Denmark, Sweden, and Finland, who had made the trip to those three countries for the chance to talk to their ideological brother in hate, and hitch a ride on his blood-stained coat tails.

Well, he may rest assured we know our enemies too, and the death of our CIA agent and that of an allied Israeli citizen will not be forgotten!

COMMENT THREAD

COMMENT 641. *I guess the fair question to ask is whether or not the CIA and Mossad were involved in planning the attack in Russia…*

COMMENT 642. *That's it; blame our government and Israel, as usual! What the hell are you, a damned terrorist sympathizer or just an anti-Semite?*

COMMENT 643. *I'm not blaming anybody. I'm just asking a simple question; were they involved or not?*

COMMENT 644. *Definition of an anti-Semite: anyone the Jews don't like.*

COMMENT 645. *Speaking of terrorists, what about that Al Qaida raghead that went to meet his seventy-two virgins in Pristina? Ai-yi-yi-yi-KABOOM!*

COMMENT 645. *That "raghead" was a Chechen leader, fighting to free his people from their brutal Russian occupation!*

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COMMENT 646. *I'm from NYC, you asshole, and that Al Qaida son of a bitch was from the group that blew down the towers on 9-11! You make him sound like Frank Gore, except Gore was brave enough to do his fighting himself.*

This thread is now closed for comments by order of the US Government, Department of Homeland Security.

Patriot Radio in Exile Shortwave Program

"*I want all my listeners to look deep into this story and think about the details. The United States of America and Israel were working hand in hand directly with the Al Qaida terror group, an organization that both countries are supposedly at war with. Now ask yourself this question; how long have they been doing it? We know they armed and trained them before 9-11, and now we know they've been working with them since. So, what were they doing ON 9-11? Blowing up a couple of buildings and the Pentagon, maybe?*

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CHAPTER 35

Southern Legal Journal

The Provisional Congress of the Confederate States of America took quick action today to halt the threatened exodus of a number of large businesses in response to the recently-passed comprehensive immigration bill. Several companies had indicated they would be moving their operations offshore, both in protest of CS sanctions against the US and Israel, and due to the expected demands by workers for increased wages and benefits in the wake of the law removing all illegal immigrants. In response, the Congress passed the Ashby-Boggess act that would make that action a very expensive proposition indeed.

"No one will prevent you from leaving," the newly-appointed Secretary of Commerce, Congressman TJ Ashby of Louisiana told reporters during a press conference in Richmond today, "but if a handful of companies think they can hold this country hostage, dictate immigration policy or any other policy to the Confederate States of America, artificially depress wages on Southern workers, and bankrupt entire communities, all without any cost to them, they've got another think coming! The Confederacy is run by and for the states and the people, not by and for big corporations!"

Secretary Ashby went on to describe the new law, saying that any company moving 'offshore' (that is, anywhere outside the CSA or CNAN) will be assessed a 100% tariff on any and all goods or services afterward imported into the CSA, putting them at a near-impossible disadvantage against both domestic and conventional foreign competitors. Further, while the corporations may own the facilities and equipment, some industries are considered vital to both national and state infrastructure, and that used equipment is forbidden under this law from export without special permission, meaning it has to remain in the Confederacy.

In the wake of that rule, today ten states passed laws requiring that any manufacturing or commercial facility closed for more than six months be put up for lease or sale, and allow condemnation proceedings against the properties under certain circumstances, in which the state would condemn the idle facilities and sell them, giving the original owners the price obtained, minus the state's expenses in doing so.

West Virginia Congressman Jack Boggess, co-sponsor of the bill, applauded the states' actions.

"We didn't fight this war in order to have a country turned into a Southern-fried ghost town, an economic wasteland, by corporate greed," he said.

Despite threats to turn the South into exactly that, it doesn't look like they have any credibility, because investors in at least a dozen countries are already lining up with cash in hand, ready to buy.

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CHAPTER 36

Wilmington, North Carolina

"So, why have you come to me?"

Looking at each other instead of at the man across the hotel suite's dining room table, the two attorneys in the understated but expensive dark suits tried to decide how much to say. They had been told the individual they were dealing with was so utterly corrupt he was perfectly safe to deal with, but still…

"We've been instructed to tell you that you were recommended to our clients by a mutual friend and benefactor north of here," said the one on the left.

The man knew exactly who they were talking about, of course; this was a bone being thrown to him by Ostrovsky, who doubtless owned stock in the aforementioned 'clients,' and had an agenda that whatever they wanted would advance. He nodded, taking another drag off his Cuban cigar before pursing his lips and idly pushing an ashtray back and forth with a carefully-manicured index finger.

"And did our 'mutual friend and benefactor' tell you I don't work cheap?"

After another glance, the same one answered, "Yes, we were informed that you would require adequate remuneration for your assistance."

The man smiled like a shark.

At least they know the most important thing!

"So, what exactly do you want me to do?"

"That should be obvious," the one on the left told him, ticking off the items on his fingers, one by one, "We want a number of the recent bills overturned, complete deregulation of business, the foreign business investors out, and Mexican and Somali laborers back. There are more jobs than there are workers!"

"I think you mean Southerners won't work for the shit wages you paid the Mexicans and niggers, right?"

"Hey!" the one on the right again. "Whose side are you on?"

"I'm on my side, alright? Now, isn't it true what I said about the wages*?"*

"Of course it's true! We represent large multinational corporations and businessmen all across the South. With the limitations of this bill, plus having to compete with the Japs and having to pay these high wages is going to kill our clients' profit margins. We can't afford to go on like this."

"So what would you like for me to do about it?"

"We're talking to you because we know you've still got a lot of power and your state is a weak link; we need you to use it, to be our foot in the door, and get this government back the way it should be, back the way it was when the US ran things, only with even less regulation, where we can all make some real money for a change."

"Plus that other thing," the man pointed out, reveling in his power over these powerful men.

"We don't know what you mean," said the one on the left, after looking at his partner again.

Bullshit! the traitor thought, *I know shabbos goy when I see them!*

"Let's be honest; you want the Jews back in and the sanctions against Israel ended more than anything else. Am I right?"

"Of course! Their removal was nothing but anti-Semitism –"

"Who gives a shit? More importantly, it was the removal of your investors and stockholders, who ran crying to our mutual friend, and then put you all up to coming here to talk to me in the first place, right?"

Another exchange of glances, then, "So what if it is? Will you help us or not?"

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"I might be able to do that, but it would be a hard job right now; not impossible, but hard, and it will require a lot of maneuvering and positioning. And then there's the question of compensation…"

"We'll make it worth your while." He slid a piece of paper with a number written on it across the table. "Is this figure satisfactory?"

The deal with the paper was one of those things that had always pissed the man off. By writing it instead of saying it, it was a very transparent attempt to make them look 'above monetary considerations,' which he knew was BS. He was not a hypocrite himself, except when it suited his purposes.

"Yeah, it's satisfactory for a down payment."

"A down payment? Now listen here – "

"No, you listen here!" the man shouted, stabbing at the pair with a stiffened finger, "You represent banks, entertainment, land developers, hotels, construction, manufacturing, corporate agriculture, giant retailers, food processing, energy companies, and virtually every other big business in the South. I do my homework, and I know what kind money we're talking about here. So don't ever try and nickel and dime me again, or the price will double; I'll give you this state back first, and eventually this country, but it's not going to come cheap."

"Come on! This is about states' rights!"

He leaned back with a snort of derision.

"States' rights my ass! States' rights and a dollar will get you a cup of coffee at the gas station. No more arguments; if you want me to do this, you all better figure on strapping a saddle on your ass, because I'm going to ride you all the way to the bank!"

"I don't guess we have a choice."

"That's right, you don't."

Virginia

"So this is Richmond."

Frank made the rhetorical observation as they drove up Monument Avenue. The street's designation seemed a misnomer now, because the towering, beautiful Confederate monuments dedicated to the heroes of the Second Revolution of 1861 were all gone, torn down by Richmond City Government in order to show its racial sensitivity and solidarity with the United States. As one of his first acts upon taking power, Jonathon Edge had personally overseen the trials and executions of the mayor and every member of the city council who had given their approval for the treason and hadn't had the good sense to flee to the US, but the damage had already been done.

Still, some things done can be undone as well, and work was already underway to do just that. The spots where each of the memorials had stood were construction sites now, where volunteers put in their own time and money rebuilding them even better than before. The statues of Lincoln and Arthur Ashe put up as insults had already been melted down to form part of the metal that would be required, and the defunct city officials' confiscated assets were helping to pay for it all.

"I've seen pictures," Samantha said wistfully, looking at the passing scaffolding and caution tape, and at the Virginians bending their backs to their shovels despite the relatively cold weather, "and it was so *beautiful!*" Turning, she looked determinedly at her husband. "It will be again."

Frank smiled at her. "You sound pretty sure of that. Am I right in suspecting that our Press Secretary is about to throw her considerable talents and influence as spokesperson for the Confederate Government behind the project?"

It was her turn to smile, and she responded with, "How did you ever guess? Anyway, it won't be as hard as it could have been; at least they salvaged the statues."

Frank sat up straighter in surprise.

"Really? I'd heard they were destroyed!"

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She shook her head. “They were supposed to be; in fact, they were sold to a scrap metal dealer, who disassembled them and hauled them away, along with the ornamental fences and everything else. As it turns out, he was a closet Confederate. He buried everything in the dirt floor of one of his buildings, and then put a big pile of scrap motor blocks on top of it all. He notified Edge just a couple of weeks ago that he had them, and was ready to deliver them back to Richmond whenever we were ready for them.”

“Save your Confederate statues, boys,” Billy quipped over his shoulder, “‘cause the South is gonna rise again!”

“He took one heck of a risk,” Frank said, “God only knows what they would have done to him if he had been caught. He deserves some kind of a medal for that!”

Samantha’s eyes twinkled. “You figure out what medal you want to give him, and I suspect the Press Secretary will use her position to promote it vigorously.”

“I’m glad I know people in such high places.”

They both laughed at that, and little Linda, strapped into her car seat between them, gurgled and squirmed restlessly. Samantha reached down to stroke her cheek. “You just hang on for a few more minutes, honey, and we’ll get you out of that seat. I promise.”

Linda smiled a little, but looked doubtful. It had been a long ride.

“Want out,” she said, although it came out as a plaintive “Wan’ ou’,” and both her parents smiled in sympathy.

“Believe me, so do I,” her mother told her, “I think we all do.”

Listening to the two people he loved most, Frank reflected that the trip from Columbia to the new Confederate Capital at Richmond had definitely been a long one, longer than expected at any rate. What should have been a seven hour trip ended up taking a good ten hours, and all because they stopped for breakfast.

Samantha had been feeling a little queasy with morning sickness, Frank and Cynthia were both getting hungry, Linda was starting to whine and fuss, and Billy’s rumbling belly was making so much noise they began to fear it might break out of his body on its own and eat someone, so they had decided to stop at a little roadside diner near the North Carolina border and grab a quick bite.

Frank shook his head at the thought.

Mistake!

None of them had given any real thought to the consequences of fame once they were back home, and, unbeknown to them, they were about to learn a firsthand lesson.

It began simply enough; they walked in, with Frank carrying his sleepy daughter in his arms, and sat down in a corner booth big enough to hold them all. Of course, they took a quick visual sweep of their surroundings as a hard-learned and deeply-ingrained survival skill, and noticed the awestruck stares and whispers from the staff and patrons when they were recognized, but they paid little attention. A skinny teenage waitress whose blue eyes seemed to be doing their best to make themselves wider than the head that contained them took their order with a shaking hand, and then nervously asked if she could “please-please-*please*” take her picture with the couple. Frank smiled and nodded, and Cynthia used the girl’s cell phone to snap the image while she sat beside Samantha in the bodyguard’s temporarily vacated spot.

It didn’t occur to them that she might immediately hit a few more buttons and send that picture out to everyone she knew, or that a girl that young would know so many people. Every one of those called everyone they knew, and within ten minutes, by the time she brought their food, things began to snowball.

As they dug into the eggs, sausage, bacon, grits, and biscuits, Frank remarked, “This is pretty good.”

“Not bad,” Billy said. “Of course, you can usually tell how good the food is by the crowd.” Glancing out the window, he added. “It looks like the breakfast club’s comin’ in; from the looks of that parkin’ lot, they must turn a pretty good trade here.”

Indeed, the parking lot was filling up; in fact, it was already full, yet more people were still squeezing into it, as well as parking along the roadside. In fact, the road itself was becoming jammed, and he could see a TV news van unloading at the curb and a set of blue lights flashing far away in the distance. The realization suddenly began to dawn on all of them.

“You surely don’t think...” Samantha began, and Frank finished with, “I really hope not!”

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Hopes, however, were in vain, as it seemed like everyone in the county had come to meet the heroes of the Revolution, and more were still coming, with no end in sight.

"Oh God!" Cynthia hissed, thinking of the security nightmare that was happening all around them, but Billy remained calm, pausing in working his fork only long enough to tug the string by the window and close the curtain so they wouldn't be stared at from outside.

"Relax," he told her around a mouthful of sausage. "You've got about two thousand security guards outside, and more a'comin' all the time. Those are fans, and I reckon anybody tries anything, they'd have to mop up what was left of him with a sponge." Looking up at the rapidly filling counter, he waved his cup and yelled, "Hey honey, can I get a refill over here? An' bring me another order of that sausage while you're at it, if you would, please."

The restaurant manager, an unusually irascible red-haired White woman as broad as Billy if not quite as tall, quickly thinned out the crowd by not allowing anyone past the door until there was a seat open, while warning them in advance that, if they bothered the General, she'd personally throw them out.

They got to finish eating more or less in peace, but their car was out in the lot, so they had to work their way through the crowd on the way out. That took over two hours of accepting handshakes, congratulations, hugs, and pats on the back to get away, and that was with the help of three South Carolina State Troopers, the entire Sheriff's Department, and the local militia company, all of whom also wanted to meet them and get their pictures taken.

Following that little episode, they ate their next two meals through fast-food drive-through windows, and bathroom stops were planned several miles ahead and carried out with all the rapidity of hit and run raids. By the time they reached Virginia, they were all dog-tired, Linda was cranky, and the only thing they wanted to do was just get out of that damned car.

With the passing of a few minutes and a few more turns, Cynthia said, "We're there," in an awestruck voice.

"My God!" Samantha responded, "It looks like a castle!"

Billy grinned broadly, showing the gap between his teeth. "I swear, Frank, you take me to the nicest places!"

"Surprise!" was all Frank could manage.

Seeing it in pictures is one thing, but seeing it in real life…man!

The Jefferson Hotel dated back to 1895, and did, in fact, look somewhat like a castle. It was also a five star institution, one of the most luxurious hotels in any state, North or South. He hadn't given it much thought – after all, a hotel was a hotel…or it had been until today.

They had no sooner stopped the car than the hotel doors flew open and a small horde of employees descended upon them. While some of them opened the car doors and two more provided unneeded help in assisting Cynthia and Samantha out of the car, the manager clasped his hands together and looked like he was about to bow to Frank.

"Welcome to the Jefferson, General and Mrs. Gore, gentleman and lady!" he assured them in a very upper class British accent, "I'm the manager, Joseph Hardcastle; if you require anything at all, please don't hesitate to ask for me. We're very glad to have you!"

That's pretty obvious, Frank thought as he stuck out his hand, and, as the man nervously shook it, he asked, "We're not going to have to go through this routine every day we're here, are we?"

Instantly the facade dropped, and the Mr. Hardcastle smiled easily and shook his head. "Not if you prefer we don't, sir."

"Not really, no. I'm the one who should be thanking you for putting us up in a beautiful place like this."

The manager shook his head once again, this time so hard it looked like it might unscrew and fall off.

"Oh, no, no; we're the ones who owe you, not only for what you've done for this country, but what you've done for this hotel." Pausing a moment, he turned towards the car and sharply told the bell hops, "Be careful with the luggage; take it on up to their suite. And be sure you park the car in the space we reserved, right under the security camera."

Facing Frank once more, he quietly asked, "May I be frank with you, General?"

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Frank wanted to tell him, no, he'd be Frank, but resisted the temptation.

"By all means."

"The ownership of this hotel has changed hands several times over the past few years until the company I work for acquired it. We were in serious financial trouble, with the depression and the War, and it pains me to admit we were on our last legs. Once we announced that you had chosen the Jefferson, however – "

"Actually, it was the other way around," Frank told him with a grin, "it was more like the Jefferson chose us."

The man's smile grew broader and more meaningful as he shrugged and flipped his hands over dismissively.

"A mere technicality, not worth mentioning, so please don't. Anyway, once people found out your party would be living here, within two days every room in the place was solidly booked for the next three months, with enough of a waiting list in case of cancellation to do it all over again. We currently have reservations from two-dozen countries, but most of the new customers are ordinary, not particularly well-off people who want a chance to stay in the same hotel with you and your lovely wife. Of course, we have quite a few who are celebrities in their own right, whose presence is just adding to the attraction. Besides half a dozen Congressmen, we've booked movie and music stars, foreign dignitaries, and rich socialites." His grin grew broader still. "You've single-handedly moved us from the red well into the black before you even arrived; we should be paying you!"

"Well, we still appreciate it."

"Believe me, sir, it's our pleasure! Please, don't hesitate to take advantage of our two fine restaurants, our salon and spa, our fitness center, and our twenty-four hour room service. Again, it's all on the house; it's the least we can do for you and the Confederacy."

Thinking of Billy, Frank fought a smile as he said, "You haven't seen us eat."

"I think we can cover that, sir," the manager remarked somewhat dryly. "I do have two favors I'd like to ask, however, if I may." He waited until Frank nodded his permission before proceeding. "First, would you please consider holding a few of your press conferences and meetings in our state-of-the-art conference room here at the Jefferson? We'll offer the room free of charge; consider its use our gift to Dixie." That they both knew it would be wonderful advertising for the hotel too, as well as netting them a big Virginia State tax write-off for the full amount under a just-passed Old Dominion law making donations to either the State or Confederate Governments charitable contributions. That also went without mentioning, so he didn't bother to say it.

"I think I can arrange that. What's the other favor?"

The manager looked slightly sheepish as he said, "It's more of a personal one. Could I possibly get an autographed picture of you for the lobby, and another one for my little boy? He was born here in Virginia and he's seven years old. You're his hero."

"Yes, but I can do better than that. As soon as I get settled into my office, I'm going to be doing inspection tours of some of the military bases. Why don't I bring him with me when I go to one of the closer ones in the next couple of weeks, say, Fort A.P. Hill, and he can spend the day with me seeing just how boring his 'hero's' job really is?"

Gaping in shock, he said, "I couldn't ask you to inconvenience yourself like that!"

"You didn't ask; I volunteered, remember? And it's no inconvenience, either. Kids aren't an inconvenience; they're our future."

The man was almost in tears as he grabbed Frank's hand and pumped it again in gratitude. "I don't know how to thank you!"

"You just did. Now, where do I sign in?"

They entered, struck by the luxurious beauty of the place, and then Samantha came to a dead stop. "Frank, look at that staircase!"

Obediently regarding it, he frowned slightly. "That looks familiar."

"It should be; that's the Tara staircase, from *Gone With the Wind*!"

"A lot of people think that, ma'am," the manager said, having heard the remark. "Technically, this isn't the

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actual staircase used in the movie, but the one the Tara stairs were modeled directly after."

Giggling suddenly, Samantha looked at her husband, hooked her arm through his, and said, "Close enough. Shall we go up to our room, Rhett?"

"That sounds like a fine idea to me, Miss Scarlet," he told her in his best imitation, "even if I look a lot more like Jack Palance than Clark Gable."

"You don't look like Jack Palance!" she declared, even while thinking, *Well, maybe a little now, but younger and handsomer.* The rocket attack that had nearly killed him in North Carolina had broken several of his facial bones, and, with the War still raging, there had been no plastic surgeon to fix them. Still, she reflected, he had been an amateur boxer and full-contact fighter before she met him, and those sports had definitely left their mark on his features even then, and she had still found him ruggedly handsome. The attack had just rearranged them a little bit more, that's all, and to her he was still handsome, just in a...*ruggedly-er* way.

Listen to me! I'm a professional journalist, and I'm using words like 'ruggedly-er!'

Now that they had a country, there were surgeons readily available, of course, but she just didn't see Frank being concerned enough about it to do it voluntarily. Oh, if she asked him to, she knew beyond a doubt he'd make the appointment without complaint, but she wasn't about to ask; not so much for his sake as for hers. She knew the risk of that type of surgery was minimal, but it was a risk nonetheless, and she'd be damned if she'd take a chance on losing the man she loved more than life itself over minor cosmetic damage.

"Besides," she added, "Clark Gable had big ears."

As they all stared at the opulent lobby, Billy said, "Man, I'm just glad the hotel is pickin' up this tab!"

"I wouldn't worry," Frank told him, "They'll make that up just off the Congress. Half of them will end staying there too, but either their states or the general government will be picking up the cost for most of theirs." He sighed and shook his head. "I don't know how they can justify that kind of expense right now, especially on a long term basis."

"We've got some good people in the Congress," Samantha replied, "but I think we've got some who could justify anything!"

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DAY 975

CHAPTER 37

North Carolina Congressman Paul McDonald's head hurt. In fact, his body hurt, his teeth hurt, even his hair hurt. He had gone to a high-end local watering hole following the Congressional meeting that had gone on late into the night, and drank a little…

But surely to God, not that much! Man, I feel awful!

Blinking his gummy eyes, he looked around in confusion, having no idea even where the hell he was, and racked his brain. He had spent the day in the Old Richmond City Hall, on temporary loan to the Confederate Government while the location of the new Capital Building was being planned. Then he had gone to a local restaurant, then to a bar, and now…he didn't have a clue. It looked like a motel room, but...

His train of thought halted when he looked in the bed beside him.

Paul McDonald had a lot of faults, but infidelity and miscegenation definitely weren't among them...at least until now. Now there was a black crack whore in bed with him, smiling stupidly with her thick lips and big teeth, grinning wide enough to show her blue-spotted gums.

Oh shit!

"Good morning, Paul."

His head swiveled at the voice of a third person, and he mentally repeated himself.

Ohshitohshitohshit!

LC Tarbox smiled down at him without humor for a moment, then turned to the hooker.

"Here," he said, casually dropping a zip-lock bag of crack rocks on her bare, prune-black stomach, "You did a good job; now get the hell out of here, and keep your mouth shut."

She nodded and mumbled something while she slipped into her tee shirt and shorts, but her wide eyes and dulled mind never left the bag containing a week's supply of her drug of choice; she couldn't wait to get somewhere private where she could fire up a pipe. In less than a minute, not even bothering to put on her ratty sneakers, she was out the door and gone before her benefactor could change his mind.

Tarbox didn't say a word; he simply turned his laptop on the motel dresser to face McDonald and display the graphic pictures of the Congressman in sexual congress with the room's just departed occupant.

"It's called Rohypnol, more commonly known as the 'date rape drug.' Men use it to get women too messed up to know what they're doing, but it works just as well the other way around."

"You son of a bitch!" McDonald shouted with rage at being set up, and he started to rise, but Tarbox produced a fully-engraved, but still deadly .380 Walther PPK automatic and aimed it at his head.

"Don't make me kill you!" he snapped, and, once he saw McDonald settling back down, his voice softened to a more reasonable tone. "Now, sit down and listen, because I'm only going to say this once. I've already emailed these pictures to my people, and if anything happens to me, they'll send them on the rest of the members of Congress as well as to your wife."

Most of the other Provisional Congressmen – and certainly all of those who had been guerrilla leaders – would have waited their chance and, at the first opportunity, would have killed Tarbox anyway for what he had just done. Then they would have gotten the email addresses from his computer, and tracked down and killed everyone he had sent the images to, and let the chips fall where they may, but McDonald wasn't cut from the same cloth. He was a politician who had avoided taking too much of a personal part in the late violence, and prided himself on his ability to straddle the fence with the best of them, and to compromise. Imagining the ramifications of what Tarbox had threatened, McDonald seemed to deflate, and sank back into the pillow.

"So..." he began, trying to his best to put two and two together, and come up with any answer besides the end of the world as he knew it, "What do I have to do to keep that from happening?"

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Tarbox smiled like a shark.

"Today, you're going to resign from the Congress and appoint me to fill your position."

McDonald was aghast.

"But...look, I can pay you – "

"I don't want your damned money!" Tarbox snapped. "I've got plenty of that. I want your power, and I'm going to have it, one way or another!" Getting control of himself, he shoved the PPK back into his pocket and sat down on the edge of the bed, and when he spoke again, his voice was calm and reasonable. "I know what you're thinking; you think you can call the Congress and tell them what happened. Go ahead; they know I'm enough of a son of a bitch to do it, but, once they see those pictures, you'll always be the nigger lover, whether you meant to or not; there'll always be that doubt." He chuckled meaningfully. "I figure your wife will be even less understanding than they will."

Paul McDonald felt sick; he was trapped, with no way out except through the choice Tarbox offered him. Of course, LC could always release the pictures anyway, even if he did what he wanted...

No; my counter-accusations would either sink him too, or at least cost him enough political clout to make him ineffective. If I can just walk away...Still, there's another loose end.

"Supposing I agree; what's to keep that...that..." He struggled for words before simply gesturing at the door that the hooker had made
her exit through. "...from telling?"

Tarbox flipped his hand in a dismissive gesture, then held up a pair of fingers, one at a time.

"Two reasons. Number one, she had all the IQ of a stump to start with before she burned her brain out on crack. Reason number two, just to be sure, is because she'll be dead in a few minutes if she isn't already. Did you see her, eying those crack rocks? She can't wait to get someplace and get herself a fix. It'll be her last; they're laced with cyanide; one good puff and she's off to that big crack house in the sky."

McDonald was startled by Tarbox's casual brutality, but in the end, he was much more concerned about his own life than that of the whore who had taken part in destroying it. He blew out his breath in frustration.

"I don't reckon I've got a hell of a lot of choice."

"No, you don't." Still, even though he held the whip hand, Tarbox was an attorney, and knew very well that the carrot and the stick were much more effective than just the stick by itself. "Still, you scratch my back and I'll scratch yours. I'll get you a nice stipend so you can take a year off, and then I'll appoint you to a plumb position in the State Government, and then back you for Governor when the election rolls around. Do what I tell you, and I'll see to it you rise with me. Do we have an agreement?"

McDonald thought the whole thing sucked canal water, but by that time, he was so desperate to keep his marriage and reputation from shattering like Humpty-Dumpty on concrete that anything looked pretty damned good.

"All right. So, what reason do I give?"

Closing his laptop, Tarbox slipped it in his bag and got to his feet before answering.

"Tell them it's for your health."

McDonald thought about the hooker and shivered.

After last night, it probably is! I'd better get to the doctor!

Confederate News Service

In a move that took the Provisional Congress by surprise today, North Carolina Congressman Paul Thurston McDonald stepped down from his post, after appointing Lawrence Carter 'LC' Tarbox to fill his position. Congressman McDonald cited undisclosed health reasons for his abrupt resignation, and refused any further explanations. He is reportedly back at his home in Raleigh. All inquiries have gone unanswered...

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"How in the hell did this happen, Watis?"

Colonel Watis Suggs, head of the Tarheel State's militia forces, shook his bald head, shrugged his huge, sloping shoulders, and spread his big, calloused hands helplessly at Acting President Jonathon Edge's question. It didn't help that it was the same question he had been not only racking his brain over, but had every resource he could beg, borrow, steal, or threaten in his State working on it, and coming up empty.

"I'll be damned if I know," he finally said. "It's got to be one of three things; Tarbox either bought him, threatened him, or blackmailed him, because Paul would never have surrendered that power otherwise. In fact, now that I think about it, I don't see him being bought out; he liked being in charge too much; fancied himself a statesman instead of a politician."

"Well, it's obvious it has to be one of the two then, but I don't see Tarbox threatening him with anything physical."

"He knows better. McDonald might like to keep his candy ass parked right on the fence, but if Tarbox made a direct threat against him or his family, my guess is that he'd come running to me, because he knows damned good and well I'd give my right arm for an excuse to kill that lying, sneaky son of a bitch." Holding up his powerful, scarred hands, he added, "These are all I'd need right here, and I'd enjoy every damned minute of it!"

"I wish you'd been a few seconds later when you walked in after he was stupid enough to grab hold of Samantha that time. A couple more whacks with that pistol barrel, and she would have taken care of this problem for us."

"If she'd done that, then we'd have a whole new set of problems – "

"I know, I know," he said with a dismissive wave of his hand, "but it's still nice to think about."

The big man snorted. "Tell me about it! So, what do you suggest?"

"Just keep doing what you're doing, and find out what he's up to ASAP, because, whatever it is, it's not likely to be good."

"That's a pretty safe bet."

"You know he's going to go all out trying to undermine you, Watis. He's got North Carolina's power in his hands now."

"Well," the big man said, "if push comes to shove, he might have the power in his hands, but I've got the guns in mine. The bulk of the militia will remain loyal to me; they don't have much use for an asshole like Tarbox, who was too cowardly to fight for his country. He's smart enough to know that too, so while he might try to gradually undermine me, I don't reckon he'll take it too far, at least not overtly" His beard split in a wide grin with little humor in it. "Of course, when the story spreads through the ranks about Sammie whipping his sorry ass and why, they'll have even less use and less respect."

"Just keep reminding them. In the meantime, we'll assume it was blackmail until we learn differently. If we can find out what Tarbox has on McDonald, we might be able to change things around just a bit. Tarbox has no mandate, either from the military or the civilians; in fact, he's about as popular with most of the Tarheels I've talked to as a turd in the punchbowl. If we can find the evidence even hinting that he's subverted a Congressman by blackmail, I will personally convene a military tribunal and execute that son of a bitch for treason."

Watis shook his head. "No sir, *I* will personally execute that son of a bitch. North Carolina is the one he's hurt the most, and we're the ones who need to collect."

Edge shrugged, spreading his hands in an expression of his indifference as to who did the deed.

"That's fine by me, as long as it's done. I'll put Dayton on it; he's a miracle worker, and if anyone can find the info, it's him. The thing is…if it is blackmail, there are only two people who know for sure what it's about. Tarbox isn't likely to tell us, but..."

"But McDonald might...no, McDonald *will*. He never had any real backbone to start with, and I suspect I might be able to convince him it would be in his best interests to spill his guts to us, so we can eliminate the threat that'll be hanging over his head the rest of his life." Heaving a meaningful shrug of his own, he added, "If that doesn't work, I expect I can lean on him a little, and appeal to him on the reason of his continued good health."

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"You know him better than I do. Whatever you decide to do, though, just remember; we can't afford for this to turn into a public spectacle. You be subtle."

"Now when was I ever anything but subtle?" Watis asked innocently.

Looking at the scars on the man's face and knuckles, Edge dryly asked, "Do you want me to make a list?"

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CHAPTER 38

Former North Carolina Militia Captain Eldridge McEvoy's head felt like it was splitting open, being wedged apart like a piece of stove wood. While it didn't always hurt this badly, it had ached to one degree or another for well over a year now, every since that damned old man had fractured his skull with a shotgun butt. Just thinking about it made it hurt worse, and the veins in his temples visibly throbbed.

Damn son of a bitching Suggs! I was trying to defend the sovereignty of our state!

The Colonel hadn't seen it that way; once McEvoy had regained consciousness, Suggs court marshaled him for multiple counts of refusing to obey the direct orders of his superior officers, attempted violence against those same officers, fomenting mutiny, and cowardice in refusing to deploy as ordered. His head pounded even more at the thought until it felt like there was a big drum in his skull, going *Boom! Boom! Boom!* pulsing in time with his heartbeat.

Neither Suggs nor that hardheaded Gore nor his bitch of a wife were ever my superiors, by God! I had a duty to stand up to them!

He still remembered Suggs, sitting in his wheelchair with both his massive legs still in casts and bandages, sentencing him to death.

"May God have mercy on your soul, you sorry, worthless piece of shit!" he had said.

McEvoy had no one besides Tarbox to thank that he was still alive; the North Carolina lawyer, still recovering from his own massive head trauma courtesy of Samantha Gore, had sent a couple more of the disgraced Captain's few right-minded comrades – Privates John 'Smiler' Andrews and Clifford 'Giggles' Moore – to release him. Giggles had distracted the sentry from the front, asking him a question about some unrelated subject, and Smiler had thrown a garrote over his head from behind. The looped garrote, made from a braided wire coyote snare, had a self-locking mechanism that would only move one way: tighter. Once Andrews jammed his knee in the guard's back and yanked hard on the toggle handle he had put on the loose end, it was all over; with both carotid arteries and his windpipe shut off, in less than five seconds their victim was unconscious on the floor. Since they were in a hurry and Smiler wanted his snare back, Clifford had expedited the process by jumping high in the air and stomping both boot heels down on the helpless Tarheel's skull a few times rather than simply leaving the wire on there to finish the job. In less than thirty seconds, they had the door unlocked, their Captain out of his shackles, and they were all out of there.

Going underground had been easy, really, what with the chaos of the war. Now that the Confederates had won, it still wasn't too hard; yeah, the three were on the wanted list, but there was so much turmoil during the changeover, and so much going on of more importance than a trio of deserters, that they had pretty much fallen through the cracks. Most people who cared probably figured they had gone north; in fact, Tarbox himself had planted a rumor exactly to that effect.

Tarbox was their savior, no doubt about that, and he believed in rewarding loyalty. Besides, he was fighting the good fight, that of state sovereignty against centralized rule. The lawyer had insisted – and McEvoy believed him – that all the rhetoric Edge, Gore, Suggs and the rest spouted about sovereignty to come was nothing but smoke and mirrors, and all their talk about the need for a preliminary period of deconstruction to eliminate a century and a half of brainwashing and general Yankee-fication was only a ploy to obfuscate the issue while they consolidated their power. If they were allowed to do that, they would never let it go.

Tarbox and his followers weren't about to let that happen; in fact, they would do anything necessary to stop it...including cleaning up any loose ends that had the potential to damage their plans.

Paul McDonald looked at his lovely wife, Katherine, and shuddered at how close he had come to losing

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her.

If she had seen those pictures...

He shuddered once more. Just thinking about how butt-ugly that crackhead had been, he never wanted to see those pictures himself again, either. The former Congressman was just happy that the worst thing he had gotten physically from the encounter was a case of crabs rather than AIDS. The first had been easy enough to get rid of, but the latter would not have been!

Still, he already missed the power. Oh, he had Tarbox's promise, which he knew was worth about as much as the toilet paper he had wiped his ass with that morning. Sitting peacefully in his Raleigh home, he had had time to think, and he knew he should have listened to Suggs and Edge, and gotten rid of Tarbox back when he had the chance.

The thing was, Paul McDonald hated conflict and always had. He wasn't a coward, really; he had fought a time or two growing up when there was no way out of it, and of course had fired a few shots during the Revolution out of necessity, but inwardly, he was a born a peace maker.

Blessed are the peacemakers...

For they shall inherit Jack shit!

At least, that's what he had ended up with, so he reckoned his bitterness could be excused. Looking down the table, he supposed that at least he still had Katherine, and his children, nine year-old Susie and seven year-old William. They saw him looking and smiled back at him, and the over-easy eggs he had just forked into his mouth suddenly tasted like ashes.

I've got them as long as I dance on Tarbox's string.

Paul was a natural-born compromiser who had lived a life of trying to please both sides, and, in the end, he had only angered both. In not choosing one or the other, but trying to get them to work together for the common good, he had left himself open, and now he was forced to give his allegiance to the one he liked least...

Maybe.

He could go to Watis Suggs: not Edge, who he was afraid of, and not Gore, who he didn't know well enough to predict what he might do, but Suggs. For all he knew, Edge might even use the information against him himself; at least, he wouldn't put it past him. His fellow North Carolinian, however, was not that subtle. Oh, Suggs might beat the hell out of him or even kill him if he thought it would be to his advantage, but blackmail wasn't his style. He was a highly intelligent yet simple man who saw the world in clearly-defined black and white, and, in his book, LC Tarbox definitely fell into the black category. If he went to the big, shaven-headed hillbilly, laid out the problem for him, and offered his allegiance...

If anyone can get those pictures back and end the threat posed by Tarbox, it would be him!

He recalled a tee-shirt he had seen the big man wear once: black with plain white letters that said, "THERE IS NO PROBLEM THAT CAN'T BE SOLVED BY THE SUITABLE APPLICATION OF HIGH EXPLOSIVES."

Paul McDonald didn't know if the Colonel would solve his problem that way or not, but he did know, one way or the other, that, in exchange for his support, it would be solved.

His thoughts were interrupted by a jangling phone, and he heard Katherine say, "Please get that, William."

"Yes, ma'am."

Paul smiled as the boy obediently rose. Not Billy or Bill; no, his pug-nosed, precocious seven year-old insisted on the formal William. His older sister, nine year-old Susie – who hated her own full name of Susan – found it irritating, which was probably why he did it. Still, the normal sibling rivalries aside, they were good kids and he was proud of them. He looked forward to a better world for them, and he hoped that it would be one free of the violence they had gone through for so long.

The realization that William was standing beside him holding out the receiver brought him out of his reverie.

"It's for you, Dad; it's Colonel Suggs."

Paul's eyebrows raised in surprise.

Speak of the devil!

Taking the phone as he rose, he put it to his ear even as he started walking out of the dining room.

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"Hello, Watis. I was just thinking about you."

"*Really?"* The doubt was plain in the gravely voice.

"Yeah, really," Paul assured him as he reached the hall. He wanted to keep this conversation private. "I was just getting ready to call you. I think we need to have a little talk, just the two of us."

"*I was just thinking the same thing. I'm already in town, and I'll be there in a few minutes."*

"I'm getting ready to take my wife to work and drop the kids off at school..."

"*I'll wait for you out front. This is important."*

"You've got that right, Watis; it's *real* important!"

"*See you in a few. Bye."*

Paul heard the click in his ear when the Colonel disconnected. Returning the phone to its cradle, he fought the urge to rub his hands together with glee.

Soon it will all be over!

McEvoy reflected, not for the first time, that, as much as he might appreciate what Tarbox had done for him, the attorney definitely had poor taste in help. After being stuck with these two since his escape, he was sick of them, probably because, when it came down to it, he was an idealist, while they believed in nothing, and loved nothing but violence and death.

Smiler and Giggles were best friends, if their kind could have friends. They had met while doing their last of several stints in prison – McEvoy often wondered if they might have been butt-buddies – and it was a match made in Hell.

'Smiler' Andrews got his name from the open, friendly grin he always wore, shining through his thick, reddish beard; a grin that never left his face but never reached his gray eyes, which were as flat, cold, and lifeless as those of a statue or a dead man. Standing five-foot eight from his boots to the top of his shaggy auburn hair, he weighed a hundred-ninety pounds, and all of it was rock-hard muscle, concentrated primarily in his chest, shoulders and massive, heavily tattooed arms. Before the war, he had been an enforcer for a biker gang that was deeply involved in the drug trade, and occasionally hired out as muscle on the side to anyone who needed a little wet work done. He was perfect for the job because he was completely amoral; a sadistic killer whose greatest joy seemed to be the pride he took in his fatal art.

One only had to look at Clifford Moore – 'Giggles' – to realize that something had gone very wrong somewhere in his genetic code. His flat, slightly slant-eyed face rising half a head taller than his buddy, he was a gangling collection of too-long arms and legs, whose knobby joints and skinny diameter gave a totally deceiving impression of the strength that lay hidden within them. He kept his light blond hair in a modern, disheveled look, not out of desire, but because his scalp housed no fewer than half-a-dozen cowlicks, each one pointing its growth in a different direction. Add to that his one blue and one brown eye, and his habit of giggling constantly, and 'Giggles' looked like an idiot. In many ways he was, but an idiot savant. What intellect he possessed was best stimulated by the various methods of killing, and, working for a Dixie mafia family, he had become, not a craftsman, but literally an artist in the ways of death. He especially liked things that blew up, and he was as good at making them as any military-trained demolitions expert. In fact, the Tarheel Militia had used him for exactly that during the War.

Both men – covertly recruited into the Confederate ranks by Tarbox – had fought and fought well, primarily because they were psychopaths and enjoyed killing so much. They also kept their master informed of what his rival, Colonel Suggs, was up to, and in return, Tarbox did them quiet favors. He saw to it they had drugs when they wanted them, as well as whores. The whores were easy to come by, since the pair didn't give a damn what color they were; just that they were fun. Considering that fewer eyebrows were raised when a colored prostitute disappeared, it was just as well, since they occasionally failed to survive Smiler's and Giggles' more imaginative moments.

"Here he comes."

McEvoy looked up at Smiler's statement in time to see Paul McDonald exiting his house. He paused on the stoop, holding the door open while Katherine and the children went out, and then turned to lock it before

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following them to the car.

"Damn! He's got his family with him."

"Yeah," Andrews said with a shrug, "tough break...for them."

As he watched the former Congressman opening the door to the blue Chevy Cobalt, Clifford giggled again.

"I reckon this just ain't their lucky day!"

McEvoy felt bad, but what could he do? Besides, this was bigger than one woman and a couple of kids. Setting his jaw, he spoke through clenched teeth.

"As soon as he shuts the door, do it!"

Clifford did it; the faint echo of the slamming car door half a block away hadn't even finished sounding when he threw the switch on the remote control.

Whatever their other vices, Giggles and Smiler could never be accused of taking half-measures. They had packed ten sticks of dynamite under each front seat, and, at their signal, it detonated.

The result was not a slow motion Hollywood-style blast, but a short, brutal *Boom!* that obscured the vehicle for an instant in smoke and particulate matter, and cleared away seconds later to reveal a ruined hulk ripped open from the inside, barely recognizable as having once been a car. Pieces of meat and metal came raining down, clattering on the pavement or thumping wetly onto other cars parked nearby. A fire started in the twisted wreckage, and began burning sullenly.

"Yeah!" Giggles shouted, "Freakin' yeah! Did you see that shit? KA-BOOM!"

"Off to never-never land," Smiler added, sending the already-overjoyed Giggles into a laughing fit, and McEvoy swore he saw the man's nostrils flare, as if he was trying to take in the smell of torn and scorched flesh, like a wine snob sniffing a cork. Dropping his eyes, they passed Giggles' lap, and he was filled with disgust and horror when he realized the man had a very obvious erection over the carnage he had just caused.

"It's done," McEvoy told them, feeling his queasy stomach roiling as he gestured forward with his right index finger, "Let's go."

Clifford was still giggling as Andrews shifted into drive and began to pull away.

Watis grunted when he spotted Paul McDonald just getting in his car from over a block away.

I'm early. No big deal; like I told him, I'll wait.

Jerking in surprise when he saw the car blow apart, he realized he'd be waiting a long time before he got a chance to talk to him now.

So startled by what he had just seen, he almost didn't notice the car pull out and head towards him, but some instinct seemed to drag his eyes in that direction, and he noticed something familiar about the men in the front seat, especially the passenger...

"That's why you always put it under the seat," Clifford was telling them triumphantly, between bouts of giggling, "See, most dumbasses, they just stick it under the car, and it might do the job or it might not. Put 'er under the seats, though, and *Boom!* Blows 'em right up through the roof, ever' damn time! Hee-hee! And the parts just come rainin' down!"

"Why don't you shut up?" McEvoy asked, which only had the effect of getting Andrews started.

"Don't begrudge a man taking pride in his work. Helluva job, Giggles."

"Thanks." *Giggle.* "Like I was sayin'..."

"And like I was saying shut the hell up, you sick, screwed up son of a bitch!" McEvoy exploded.

The seemingly imperturbable Andrews spared him a glance, with his flat, cold eyes that in no way reflected the smile on his face.

"Who pissed in your pocket, Captain? I didn't notice you being too squeamish when he pulped Hudson's head breaking you out. Now my best advice to you is just to settle your ass down right now, or else...*Holy shit! It's Suggs!*"

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Watis recognized the trio in the approaching car at the same instant they realized who he was, and, although not an educated man, the militia leader was more than capable of putting two and two together and coming up with four. That these particular men were leaving the scene of the explosion could be no coincidence.

Besides, I've got a personal score to settle with those sons of bitches!

McEvoy frantically gestured ahead, and Andrews had already jammed the pedal to the metal and was desperately trying to get past. Even as he reached for his MAC10 on the seat beside him with his right hand, the still giggling Clifford used his left to give Suggs the finger.

By the time Watis could jerk the wheel, they were already alongside, so instead of impacting their rear fender with a pit maneuver that would have sent the Ford spinning out of control, all he managed to do was hook their rear bumper in passing and rip it off, sending it clattering to the road. Andrews roared on by, and Watis jammed on the brakes, cranking the steering wheel hard to the left...and then the rubbernecking driver in the Mini-Cooper behind him, engrossed with trying to get a better view of the explosion, plowed into his rear end. The force continued driving the car on its angled course, and instantly the Colonel's front bumper was jammed against a parked station wagon, while the Cooper was pressed tightly against the rear, wedging it in.

"*Damn it to hell!"* he roared, and flung the door open even as he drew the .44 magnum that was holstered by his side.

The Cooper's driver was out just as quickly as Watis, and exited screaming and grabbing for the Colonel's massive arm in anger at the damage to his vehicle. "Why the hell did you stop like that, you stupid son of a – *Uhh!*"

His target was rapidly gaining distance, and Watis didn't have time to fool with the irritated driver. He settled things by slapping the hapless interloper smartly across the forehead with the Model 29's barrel, sending him falling back halfway through his open door before his head bounced off the roof and he slid bleeding and semi-conscious into the street.

Paying the fallen man no more mind, Watis Suggs quickly braced his massive arms across his door frame and began cocking, aiming and firing, cocking, aiming and firing again and again at the car that was already a hundred yards away and gaining distance.

"Go! Go!"

Andrews' perpetual smile looked more like a snarl as he snapped back at McEvoy, "I'm going, damn it! It's this freaking traffic!"

The hitman was doing his best to get out of the area before the authorities arrived, but right now he had the more immediately pressing concern of getting at least one other car between him and Suggs until he could get out of range. The problem was that traffic was heavy with people going to work or school, and following the explosion and rising cloud of smoke, everyone approaching it instinctively stopped, both for safety reasons and to get a good look, reducing the left lane nearly to a bumper to bumper parking lot, with no way in between. A stone-deaf, blue-haired, tri-focaled old lady in an old Cadillac was directly in front of them, and, blissfully unaware of any of the goings-on behind her, was seemingly in no hurry to get anywhere. Add the cars parked along both sides of the street, and there was no way around way either.

"Get out of the way, bitch!" Andrews was shouting impotently when one of Watis' 300 grain hollow pointed bullets punched through the back glass and slammed into the into the headliner right between the driver's and passenger's heads, showering them with sparkling chips.

"Damn, did you see that sumbitch?" Clifford exclaimed, a maniacal grin on his face as he stuck his finger in the hole in the roof. "That one went right by me!" He giggled even louder as he turned backwards with his knees in the seat and ripped off a wild full-auto burst through the shattered rear windshield at Watis with his MAC10. None of the .45 caliber bullets came anywhere near the Colonel, but they shattered glass and punctured sheet metal in four nearby cars, three of them occupied. No one was badly hurt, but one driver punched the gas in an attempt to get away, one locked up his breaks, and the third, a combat veteran, threw himself into the floorboard without bothering to do either. The crash of the slow speed chain reaction was still deafeningly loud.

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Watis ignored the noise, just as he had ignored the wild spray of bullets, and aimed carefully. He only had one shot left, and his quarry was nearly two hundred yards out, way outside what would normally be considered pistol range.

You ain't gonna hit anything if you keep the bullet in the gun!

Holding several feet above the moving car, he squeezed the trigger.

Andrews had finally lost patience and rammed the car in front of him and kept going, pushing it and its terrified occupant along by main force. She didn't have long to be frightened; the hammer dropped on the last cartridge in Watis' chamber, and the car was instantly full of spraying blood.

At that distance with a moving target, it was a pure luck shot, as even Watis himself would later privately admit. The big copper jacketed hollow point hit Smiler Andrews squarely in the back of the head. Exiting through his left eye, it left a red trail spattered across the dash when it went out through the exploding windshield and bounced off the hood, finally spent.

His remaining blue eye even colder and more expressionless than usual, Andrews slumped over the wheel before falling sideways against his door. The motion turned the wheel to the left, and the rapidly slowing Ford came to rest after bumping into the door of a terrified driver in the other lane.

"Sumbitch! That bastard shot Smiler!" Clifford shouted with outrage as he ejected his spent clip and jammed another one into the machine pistol's grip. McEvoy was cupping his own blood-filled right eye, its lid sliced open by a piece of flying glass, but he could see well enough out of his right. Framed by the shattered rear window, the sight of Watis Suggs charging them, rapidly closing the distance, was as unmistakable as his intent.

Watis thumbed the cylinder release and spun the revolver upright as he ran, sending a clattering rain of spent brass unheeded into the street. Turning it muzzle-down again in time to drop six new rounds in place from his speedloader, he was practiced enough never to slow his pace. Ignoring the shouts and demands to know what the hell was going on from people pouring onto their porches just as he ignored the other drivers bailing out of their cars and scrambling for cover, all of his attention was focused on one thing: the occupants of the Ford. The logical part of his mind told him he needed to take at least one of them alive, but he would just have to see about that. At the moment, that idea didn't look too promising.

Once he was loaded, he had no other distractions at all, and could concentrate solely on his speed. Watis wasn't built for distance, but, over a short piece of ground like this one separating him from his quarry, his thick, powerful legs could carry him astonishingly fast.

Your asses are mine!

Clifford opened fire again, and, being from the 'spray n' pray' school of marksmanship, held the trigger back, which was the worst thing he could do for accuracy. Bullets ricocheted off the concrete paving, hit several cars and houses, but came nowhere near Watis, except for a single round that ripped through his North Carolina militia patch and cut a shallow horizontal groove in his right shoulder. He never noticed, and didn't even bother to cover, let alone slow down. He knew from hard-won experience that a moving target was the hardest one to hit, especially one moving right towards you.

He was less than forty yards away when Clifford's weapon ran dry once more, well within range of the big revolver. Watis' teeth flashed through his black beard as he finally skidded to a halt long enough to jerk the weapon up in both hands and aim.

Piece of cake!

McEvoy was already out the door, trying to blink the blood away while fumbling for a grenade and shouting at Clifford.

"Let's go, damn it! Let's go!"

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"Sumbitch shot Smiler!" the blond man muttered again as he scrambled out after the renegade Captain and shoved his third magazine in place, and then his body jerked and fell against the open door a split second before the roar of the shot reached them. Watis had aimed for Clifford's solar plexus, his center of mass, because that way, high or low, he would still get him, and get him he did, albeit a bit low. McEvoy stared in horror at the small hole in the man's stomach, and the exit wound the size of a woman's fist in his lower back, surrounded by dangling bits of meat.

"Got me," he said matter-of-factly, and McEvoy came to an instant decision.

I'm not about to duke it out with Suggs, and Tarbox won't want any loose ends.

Wrapped up in his own problems, Clifford never even realized when his captain raised his 9mm Beretta and shot him in the head at close range. With that taken care of, McEvoy threw a fragmentation grenade at Suggs, who, having started charging again, was nearer than he had imagined.

The grenade was just leaving his hand when he realized his attacker was only fifteen feet away, and from that distance, the muzzle of the questing .44 looked like a stovepipe.

Watis had quickly closed the distance when he saw Clifford fall back inside the car, with the intent on taking the distracted McEvoy alive in order to squeeze the truth out of him about Tarbox. He had just opened his mouth to tell him to freeze when he saw the man's arm whip forward.

As luck would have it, the heavy steel grenade hit the big man right between the eyes, stunning him and knocking to his knees before it hit the ground right in front of him. His vision instantly filling with blood from the deeply-split skin of his forehead, Watis shook his head like an angry bull, blinked, and then recognized the iron death's egg lying only three feet away, still wobbling back and forth.

"Shit!"

Instantly gathering his legs beneath him, he dove headfirst for shelter behind the very vehicle he had been pursuing. No sooner had he hit belly-down on the concrete than the grenade exploded, sending shrapnel flying in all directions. Ears ringing from the close-proximity blast, Watis didn't hear the pinging of the sharp metal bits against the car body's sheet metal, or the explosive discharge of air as both tires on the side nearest the blast instantly deflated, abruptly causing the battered Ford to lean at an angle. He didn't care either; his only thought was to get to his feet and...

To hell with taking him alive! I'm going to kill that son of a bitch right now!

Watis gasped as he rose; his right leg protested at supporting his weight, and looking down, he saw the blood soaking his pants leg that told the reason why. Ignoring the shrapnel wound that had split his thigh muscle to the bone, along with the pain that went with it, he rose and snapped the Smith & Wesson forward in a two handed grip, looking for a target.

But McEvoy was gone.

Confederate News Service

Former North Carolina Congressman Paul McDonald was murdered along with his family in a brutal terrorist attack in his hometown of Durham early this morning. Witnesses say that the family had just entered their car when it exploded, instantly killing Congressman McDonald, his wife Katherine, his ten year-old daughter Susan, and his seven year-old son, William.

Colonel Watis Suggs, head of the North Carolina militia, was just arriving at the McDonald residence for a meeting with the Congressman when the explosion occurred. Spotting three of the terrorists attempting to flee the area, he single-handedly engaged them in a heated gun battle with his sidearm, killing two of them before being wounded by a grenade thrown by a third, who unfortunately escaped. Eight bystanders in the area were also wounded in the initial blast and ensuing battle.

The bodies of the dead terrorists have been positively identified as Confederate Army Provisional deserters John Andrews and Clifford Moore, both of whom had extensive criminal records and were wanted for murder and facilitating prison escape. The single escapee was identified by Colonel Suggs as Sean McEvoy, a former Captain who had been sentenced to death before Andrews and Moore broke him out of a

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military prison more than a year ago. The Confederate Marine Corps, as well as the North Carolina and surrounding State Militias and law enforcement agencies are all on the lookout for McEvoy, and a reward of one million dollars has been offered by the Confederate Government for information leading to his capture.

Colonel Suggs was treated for leg, shoulder, and head wounds, and is recovering in a military hospital this afternoon. Six of the wounded bystanders were also treated and released, one is in stable condition, and the other's condition is reported as critical.

Funeral arrangements for Congressman McDonald and his family have yet to be announced...

Phone conversation

"*Now that McDonald is out of the way, you need to take full advantage of his death. Have your people quietly start a rumor that Watis Suggs was actually the bomber in conjunction with the others, and what the witnesses saw was actually him tying up his own loose ends, blaming and killing his own team in order to prevent them from ever turning on him and testifying."*

"*But everyone knows Suggs and McEvoy hated each other! No one will believe that!"*

"*Most people won't, but you don't need them too; the conspiracy theorists will believe it, simply because they're paranoid and like conspiracies. No matter how unlikely it is, once you start the ball rolling, they'll keep it going. You don't need to make the people believe; you just have to make them doubt. That alone will reduce his standing and give him another battle to fight, distracting him from other, infinitely more important things…"*

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DAY 994

CHAPTER 39

CSA Today News Commentator

*After a promising start, action by the Confederate Congress has ground almost to a standstill with the seating of Congressman Tarbox from North Carolina. Congressman Tarbox, a*n attorney and *well-known states' rights advocate, has stood against virtually every piece of legislation coming out of the Congress on the grounds that it somehow violates state sovereignty, making everything Richmond tries to do a long, drawn-out fight. Even something as simple as the color of the new money has been brought to a halt by endless debate over minutia, but his favorite target seems to be the military in general, and Secretary of Defense Frank Gore in particular…*

"Edge is down in Texas, talking to some Russian oil investors. Wanna have some fun while he's gone?"

Jack Boggess swirled the cup of black coffee around and took a sip before answering Sam Wirtz, who had just walked into his office.

"Grab yourself a cup. What've you got in mind?"

Sam had a tight smile on his face, but it only involved his mouth, and never quite made it to his hard eyes. He took the time to pour a cup of his own before answering.

"Screwing Tarbox."

"He's not my type," Jack observed dryly, and was pleased to see his friend's eyes crinkle at the corners as the smile spread all the way to sincerity at his lame attempt at humor.

"Smartass. Let me rephrase that; making Tarbox screw himself." He made a short, stabbing motion, as if thrusting a spear at the acoustic ceiling tiles. "Hoisted on his own petard, so to speak."

The West Virginian grinned enthusiastically. "I'm in, but I do have one question."

"Shoot."

"I always wondered; just what the hell is a 'petard?'"

Sam scratched his head in thought for a moment, the shrugged.

"Damned if I know, but I'll bet it'd hurt like the devil to get hoisted by it."

"By God, I hope so!"

Pete Leach, LC Tarbox's personal secretary, was thirty-five, five foot-six and weighed in at about one hundred pounds soaking wet: a prematurely stooped, shallow-chested, oily little man with beady, close set eyes and a large nose that seemed to have taken its size from his receding chin: a man convinced that his appearance was the only thing that held him back in life. His rat-like looks had much less to do with it than his personality; with all the charm of a film noir Peter Lorre character, he was petty, vindictive, treacherous, and prone to shrill outbursts; he had all of his boss's faults and none of his few virtues. Tarbox only tolerated Leach because he found his superior computer skills useful, and the little man's sycophantic ways soothing to his ego. Tarbox took his loyalty for granted for the simple reason that no one else had any use of him, or would even tolerate his presence; Leach simply had no place else to go. Plus, Tarbox would rent a good-looking hooker for him on occasion, which was the only action Pete Leach ever had.

Right now he was alone at a table in the Capitol Complex's cafeteria, eating a barbecued pulled-pork sandwich while chewing on the injustice of the world at the same time. Other than a brief flickering of his ever-watchful eyes, he gave no outward reaction when two of Congressmen Boggess' and Wirtz's staffers

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carried their lunch trays to a table near his and sat down, but if he had been a dog, his ears would have been standing tall and at full alert so as to catch every word.

"Do you believe that shit?" one of them said, apparently oblivious to Leach's presence. Pete didn't take that as anything unusual; after all, most people never noticed him, or at least made a sincere effort not to, and most of those who did studiously ignored him.

"Not out of Frank Gore. I never would have thought it. Why would he do something like that, you reckon?"

"Money – the same as everybody else. He isn't any different than any of the rest of them. I just...I just couldn't have imagined it."

Pete Leach's food grew cold and the sauce and coleslaw soaked the forgotten bun into a slimy mess as he listened, and, picking more and more information out of the conversation, he couldn't have imagined it himself. He was sure Tarbox couldn't have conceived of it either, but that didn't matter. All that mattered was that the opposition had just handed him the head of their single most powerful and influential member on a silver platter.

He left the table immediately after they did, and he was so happy he actually skipped for a step or two as he hurried down the hall to his boss' office. He was so overjoyed, he just couldn't seem to help himself.

"General Gore," Congressman Tarbox said, swirling the name around in his mouth as he spoke, as if it had a bad taste, "it pains me to think that someone of your stature is accepting gratuities – some might even call them *bribes*."

The crowd in the visitors' gallery hushed, and Frank's expression never changed except for a tightening around his eyes. Frank hated few people – *living* people anyway, a category of which most of the original objects of his dislike no longer fell into – but Tarbox was definitely one of them. He had rebelled against Samantha's authority, and actually tried to assault her when she was pregnant. That he had been punished when she had responded to the attempt by beating him nearly to death and leaving him in a brief coma was the only reason Frank had allowed him to continue to live, influence or not. Still, he didn't let it show, but remained calm and professional.

"I have no idea what you're talking about, Mr. Tarbox." He mentally crossed his fingers as he spoke; Sam had already called and gleefully briefed him on the project even while he informed him of the emergency summons back to Richmond to face a Provisional Congress Board of Inquiry.

Ostentatiously lifting a sheet of paper from his desk, Tarbox held it before him, reading for a moment, seeking to get the most from his dramatic pause. He finally lowered it, then turned his eyes back to Frank with a piercing stare that belied the reasonable tone in his trained, carefully-controlled lawyer's voice.

"You are currently residing at the Jefferson; is that not correct?"

"That is correct." Frank's own voice was just as controlled, but his mind was racing. He already knew where this was going, allowing his planning process to race along even more rapidly than usual, especially since he had nothing to hide that would complicate matters.

"How many suites do you have there?"

"Personally, I only have one."

"And how many do your bodyguards have?"

"If you're referring to William Sprouse and Cynthia Dover, my and my wife's executive assistants respectively, they each have one suite as well."

"So you have a total of three separate suites at the Jefferson, is that right?"

"No, I only have a total one suite at the Jefferson; Miss Dover and Mr. Sprouse each have their own."

"But you're the only reason they have them, is that not so?"

"I'm afraid I don't know where they'd be staying if I didn't exist."

Tarbox frowned as a ripple of muffled laughter ran through the gallery, and shot a glare at the presiding Dr. MacFie, who sat there with a faint but unmistakably amused smile, and never even bothered laying a finger on his gavel. Turning his attention back to Frank, the North Carolina Congressman thoughtfully intoned, "Three suites, in the very finest, most luxurious, most *expensive* hotel in Richmond...I understand you take most of your meals there too, and use the spa and hairdresser as well."

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"Actually, my wife makes more use of the spa and hairdresser; I generally use the workout room."

Ignoring more giggling from the crowd, Tarbox continued. "Ah, yes, I forgot about the *state of the art* fitness center. Tell me, General, doesn't all that get a little...expensive?"

Frank smiled. "If you're interested in staying at the Jefferson, Mr. Tarbox, I'll be happy to get you a brochure listing the room rates."

Dr. MacFie, in the middle of getting a drink of water, inhaled it the wrong way and choked at the remark, bending over and hacking as Congressman Russel Nash hooted with laughter as he pounded him on the back.

Listening at the building mirth rising all around him, Tarbox knew it was time to go in for the kill.

"Tell me, General Gore, how much money do you pay for all of this?"

Frank shrugged. "Nothing."

The entire chamber went quiet and every eye was suddenly upon Frank.

"That sounds like a very good deal," Tarbox said with a cold smile, only to be interrupted by Frank saying, "It is."

"So you, a famous man, stay for free in a place the average Southerner could never afford?"

"I might be famous, but I'm not a lawyer, so I'm not rich enough to afford it either."

"General Gore," Dr. MacFie broke in over the snickering from the crowd before Tarbox could respond to that rather obvious dig, "Could you please explain how you managed this?"

"I'd like to know too," Nash said with a broad mischievous grin, "because I'd like to get a piece of this action myself!"

Frank never took his eyes off the panel, but he let his ears and his sixth sense survey the room, especially the visitors' gallery. He could detect nothing less than good humor, albeit tinged with a growing curiosity.

"I wanted to take my wife somewhere nice for a week or two, someplace we could stay while we looked for a house or an apartment. Someone suggested the Jefferson, and when I made inquiries, the manager made me an offer I couldn't refuse."

"And what," Tarbox asked, "was that offer?"

"That he would give us the suites for free if I would agree to stay there on a permanent basis while in town, instead of looking for housing elsewhere." Finally, Frank swung his eyes to the gallery. "I'm nobody special, no different from any one of you, but some people treat me like I'm some kind of celebrity or something." Turning back to the Congress, he said, "The Jefferson's management felt that having us there would be an attraction of sorts, and encourage more customers."

"So you turned your position into an advertisement, and accepted gratuities?"

"No, I made a deal, and a very good one too. I helped to save a business that was in deep trouble, kept jobs for hundreds of its employees, and in the process saved the Confederacy the thousands of dollars a month out of the treasury it had intended to spend on my housing in Richmond otherwise." Looking around, he said, "I don't know about the rest of you all, but seeing the shape some of our poor people and most parts of our country are in right now, I think that money could be put to a lot better use."

That one brought on some more cheers and even a brief standing ovation. Several of the members – the ones who were also staying at the Jefferson on the government's dime – looked distinctly uncomfortable, but were grateful, if surprised, that Frank didn't point out their presence as his neighbors. Just as he had intended by his omission, they realized they now owed him one for something he *didn't* say.

Before Tarbox could come up with an answer to that, Nash drawled pleasantly, "Can you assure us there is no conflict of interest, General?"

"Mr. Nash," Frank said with a genuine smile, which came easy since he and the somewhat corpulent Georgian had been on good terms for a long time, "I'm in charge of the military; I can't think of anything I could do within my official sphere of operations that would influence you all on the hotel business, one way or another."

"Ah, yes, the military!" Tarbox said triumphantly. "So, as part of your *deal*, you've never done anything related to the military? For instance, you've never, oh, I don't know, given a tour of a Confederate base to the Jefferson's management or their relatives?"

Feeling familiar eyes on him, he glanced up to see Sam Wirtz in the middle of a covert wink, a patently un-

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innocent cherubic expression on his face.

He's enjoying the hell out of this!

"Yes, Mr. Tarbox, I have."

"You admit it!"

"Of course I admit it; it's nothing I'm ashamed of. As a matter of fact, I did it today. Would you like me to bring my guest in now? We just got back from Fort A.P. Hill, and he's still waiting for me right outside."

"Yes!" he exclaimed triumphantly. "Let us meet the man who is entitled to such special favors from the Secretary of Defense!"

"Okay," Frank said mildly, before motioning the Sergeant at Arms over and whispering to him. The man nodded, spoke into his radio, and a moment later, one of the ushers came in leading seven year-old James Hardcastle by the hand. The little boy was looking around wide-eyed in his short-pants suit, compete with a fresh ice cream stain on his left lapel, but when Frank stood so he could see him, the boy instantly ran to him. Several people in the gallery, the majority of them women, let out a collective, "Aww..."

"Here, James," he said, patting the chair next to his, "sit beside me. You're going to address the Congress."

"Yes sir, General Gore." His voice was awestruck, but he instantly obeyed. He had been brought up right and was as good as any seven year-old boy is ever likely to be, and besides, his father had made very clear in dire and graphic detail as to exactly what he could expect if he failed to be on anything less than his absolute best behavior while with his hero. Frank took a moment to playfully ruffle his hair before turning back to the panel.

"Yes, gentlemen, I took one relative of the Jefferson's manager – who is also a friend of mine, by the way – with me on a tour of Fort Hill; this one, his son, James Hardcastle. By all means, question him and see if I've committed any improprieties or security breaches here."

By this time, several people in the galleries were holding their guts to keep from roaring with laughter.

"So, Mr. Hardcastle," Jack Boggess asked with a friendly smile, "why did you want to go with General Gore today?"

"Because he's my hero, sir, and I want to be a Confederate soldier when I grow up, just like him!" the boy said solemnly, "All I asked for was a picture with his autograph on it, but he asked me if I wanted to go on an inspection tour with him, too."

With a broadening grin, Sam asked, "So, did you have fun?"

"Oh yes, sir! I got to meet the marines and see where they lived and get in a tank and on a helicopter, and..."

The laughter became general as the boy ran on and on about the day's adventures, and Tarbox desperately tried to salvage something out of the situation.

"Well, James, what did you hear while General Gore was meeting with the officers?"

"Nothing, sir," he responded innocently, "When he met with the base commanders, Billy – oops, sorry, I mean *Mr. Sprouse* – took care of me. He took me for a ride and bought me hot dogs and candy and ice cream...I'm afraid Mom's going to be mad because I got some on my suit, but I didn't mean to..."

Sam smiled. "Son, if you were with Billy, that explains it all. I'll be happy to provide you with a written excuse on official Congressional stationary, and I'll personally pay for the dry cleaning! If all else fails, I'll call President Edge and get you a Presidential pardon too."

Johnny's eyes seemed to grow to the size of saucers.

"Wow...thank you very much, sir!"

By this time, most people had given up trying to hold it in and were literally howling, and Russel Nash was bent over holding his substantial gut while tears streamed down his face, all the while repeating "Oh, Lord! Oh Lord!" over and over. Dr. MacFie was shaking and breathing hard when he turned to North Carolina's seat.

"Well, Mr. Tarbox, do you have any more...Mr. Tarbox?"

Sam was unable to suppress his laugh of his own as he watched the North Carolina Congressman stomping away in a huff. Glancing at his partner in crime, Jack Boggess, he knew both of them had the same thought.

Gotcha, you son of a bitch!

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Confederate News Service

"*We asked random people in Richmond this question; 'What do you think about General Gore staying at a luxury hotel for free?' These were just a few of the answers we received.*

"*Hell, wouldn't you? Offer it to me for free, and I'd do it in a heartbeat!"*

"*Don't you think he's earned it? If the Jefferson doesn't want him, I'll be happy to put him up in my own house. After all he's done for us, I wouldn't think much of anyone who would take his money for anything..."*

"*He's found a way to pay for it without costing the country a dime; I wish the rest of those pecker-heads up there were half that smart!"*

"*I work at the Jefferson, and the General pretty much saved all of our jobs. I probably shouldn't say this, but he and his wife and their assistants are extremely nice and considerate, and they tip well too."*

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CHAPTER 40

Australian News Service

A humanitarian crisis of potentially mammoth proportions is brewing in Southern Africa today, as the countries of South Africa and Zimbabwe have voted to exile their entire White populations. Over a million people have been ordered to report to a refugee camp set up at a port just west of Cape Town to be processed for emigration.

"Whites belong in Europe or America," South African President Mbeki told reporters today, "not in Africa."

This has put those countries in a quandary. For one thing, all the Whites' assets have been confiscated for redistribution among the native African people, leaving them destitute. Further, because of the African Whites' reputation for having an inherently racist nature, none of the logical countries for resettlement seem inclined to accept them, due to the political fallout from their large minority populations. A final issue is the fact that South African President Mbeki is demanding one billion dollars in compensation for caring for the refugees before allowing them to depart. Only one country seemed likely to allow their immigration, but it seems that even the Confederate States of America is having second thoughts…

Frank was as angry as he had been in a long, long time. As he watched Tarbox standing at the podium, he slowly shook his head even as his teeth audibly ground together.

I'd thought I'd seen some stupid, petty, cowardly bullshit in my life, but this takes the cake!

Immediately after his last run-in with Frank over the Jefferson issue, Tarbox had managed to pull together a 'States' Rights Coalition' that included Congressmen Sloan of Arkansas, Garvey of Florida, Arvin of Tennessee, and Wright of Texas. The four were genuine and very ardent advocates of states' rights, but their main advantage, as far as Tarbox was concerned, was that they could be manipulated enough to stretch the definition of states' rights considerably. In the cases of Sloan and Wright, it required only the proper stroking of their egos, while, with the other two, it was the threat of scandal. The indefatigable North Carolinian, though a combination of threats and bribes and intense investigation, had discovered that the married Arvin was having an affair with an up-and-coming 19 year-old country music starlet in Nashville, while Garvey had once had a drunken homosexual encounter while in college. Neither of them had any desire to have those things come to light, so they became part of the coalition, voting for states' rights as defined by LC Tarbox.

Right now, they were refusing to follow through on the immigration agreement for the Afrikaners. They were in the minority, but there were enough of them to sustain a filibuster. Since the vote to allow the White Africans in had already been taken almost a year before in Camden, and the White Africans who could afford it had been trickling in since, they settled for blocking a vote on releasing the funding for the project to bring in the rest, claiming that was not part of the signed agreement with the Afrikaner representative, Colonel Van Hoot. They hammered the points of cultural pollution, lack of a quorum at the original vote, and especially the expense, over and over again.

In return, even while that was going on, an equally pissed-off Samantha, still working despite her growing pregnancy, countered by broadcasting the footage of the original signing of the agreement in Camden between the Congress and Colonel Van Hoot. Then she showed a series of interviews with a pair of White Africans, one of whom had lost both legs and the other both eyes in the service of the Confederacy, along with the widow of a third killed in the fighting. She followed that with her own personal commentary, finishing with the phrase, "Will we in Dixie maintain our honor and keep our solemn word to those who fought for our freedom, and helped us win the war, or are we no better than the Feds we fought against?" Tarbox didn't know

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how to answer that and make it sound good, so he and his cronies studiously ignored it, switched tactics, and put additional stress on the angle of expense.

"We don't have enough to take care of our own people!" he shouted from the podium, "We simply can't take care of a bunch of foreigners before we do our own! Charity begins at home!"

Edge, MacFie, Sam, and Jack Boggess pointed out repeatedly that these people were ready, willing and able to work, and there was more than enough work for them to do as soon as they got here. The fact that their able-bodied men were going to join the Confederate forces upon arrival was brought up, and Edge used that as an excuse to bring the Secretary of Defense, General Franklin Gore, to the floor to address the Congress.

"I'd like to address the expense angle first," Frank said, his voice sharp and his eyes hard, "There is very little expense in bringing these immigrants over."

Tarbox sneered. "So, running at least an entire carrier battle group from Dixie to Africa is not a major expense?" Looking around, he said, "I don't know where you get *your* money from, but in my world, tens of millions of dollars is serious money!"

"It would be, if we had to make a special trip over there to get them; however, that is not the case. At this time, the *Semmes* carrier group is sitting just outside South African territorial waters, approximately twelve and a half miles from the refugee camp near Cape Town. If this body doesn't think it's worth going twelve miles to save the lives of a million White people, including women and children, I'll pay for the fuel myself."

Frank's revelation took everyone there by surprise, including Edge. When Frank saw the acting President's wide-eyed stare, he looked at him and shrugged.

"The *Semmes* was already making its circumnavigational cruise to show the flag anyway, so, when the problem arose in South Africa, I simply rerouted them."

"You did this without Congressional approval?" Tarbox demanded in a voice full of outrage, and Frank shook his head.

"I already *had* Congressional approval for the refugees to enter, and once their situation became untenable and graduated to that of an emergency, I began making preparations to carry that process out. I presumed our government had enough *honor* that it intended to keep its word on the matter and not bring shame on the entire South by proving itself a liar."

"I don't like your attitude, and I protest this maligning of this august body – "

"You'll be protesting my foot sticking up your ass in a minute!" one of the members – Jack Boggess, although no one knew it at the time – growled under his breath, but his mike picked it up for all to hear, and the timing was exactly right. The visitors' galleries, along with several Congressmen and their staffs, burst into involuntary laughter, and Edge skillfully used the interruption to bang his gavel down.

"I believe the Honorable Gentleman from the Great State of Georgia, Mr. Nash, has a question for General Gore."

"I do," the paunchy man said with his trademark cherubic smile, "General, I think perhaps some members of our august body don't quite understand why we should allow these Afrikaners in, let alone pay for it. Perhaps you could elaborate a bit?"

Nash knew, and supported it, but he wanted to make certain everyone else knew as well. Frank was who Southerners thought of first when someone said the word "hero," and it would lend strength to the argument just by having him be the one to make it.

"Certainly, sir," Frank answered, understanding and appreciating what he was trying to do, "There are several reasons.

"The Afrikaners have agreed that, if we take them in, each and every one of their able-bodied men – between one hundred-fifty thousand and two hundred thousand – will join the Confederate Naval and Marine Forces upon their arrival. That's the equivalent of two whole divisions; thousands of them already trained and experienced soldiers, and that alone would save us more in training dollars than the cost to bring them here.

"Number one, from a purely pragmatic perspective, *we-need- these-men!* Our Naval and Marine forces are seriously under strength, and nowhere else are we going to get this many volunteers, especially in one fell swoop. As for the rest, we've got businesses and factories all over Dixie standing idle for want of employees; we've got farms lying fallow because there are not enough of us to till the land. We've got vacant homes

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waiting to be sold. This is the best solution to all of those problems."

As he spoke, Frank's voice became louder, and, after Tarbox made a carefully-staged sound of disgust, hotter. The General's cold gray eyes shifted to rest on him and his coalition.

"Number two, the decision has already been made; we have given our *word*! These people have fought beside us – many of them have *died* beside us – because of this promise we made to let them come, and to assist them in doing so if necessary, this promise that was put in place by the Confederate Government. They shed their blood with us because of it, making this a moral imperative that is nothing short of a blood oath, and if we go back on our word now, that makes us a nation of damned liars!"

Frank never took his eyes off Tarbox, and no one, either in the Congress or the audience, had any doubt about who he was talking about. The North Carolina Congressman's face grew redder and redder with anger.

"Number three, these are Christian White people: people whose ancestors came from the same places as many of our own." Looking at the packed visitors' gallery for a moment instead of at the members, he pointed and said, "Take a look at that man, that lady, that little child beside you; look at that group of school children sitting over there so politely. I mean it, damn it; *look at them*!" Any eyes that weren't already looking involuntarily swiveled that way when he barked the order. "That's what Afrikaners look like; those eyes you see looking back into yours could just as easily be the eyes of an Afrikaner child as one of our own. Can you look into those eyes and tell them you don't care if they're raped and murdered?" He swung his gaze back and forth from the crowd to the Congress, and back again. "Anybody?" When no one spoke, Frank nodded. "I didn't think so. They look like us and are fluent in our language, people with a history similar to ours, who will, *without a doubt,* be killed in the worst possible way if we fail to keep our word and decide to leave them where they are. How many of you have given money to missions and charities to save people in every corner of the globe? Why? Because it's the right thing to do, just as this is the right thing to do. How can we call ourselves Christians, Southerners, or even *men* if we go back on our solemn word, our blood oath we took to help us win our own independence, if we leave a million of our own racial brothers and brothers in Christ – White men, women, children and little babies – to rape, torture and murder at the hands of a bunch of Black savages, and sell their lives over thirty pieces of silver like Judas?" He was pounding his fist on the podium in anger by this time, and then pointed an accusing finger at the Confederate lawmakers, stabbing with it like a rapier at Tarbox to emphasize his words that came out as a growling shout that sprayed saliva unnoticed. "If we can do *that*, then we fought for *nothing*, we starved and we bled and we suffered and we died for *nothing,* and we are a nation of damned liars and cowards! We are *nothing,* and we don't deserve our independence!"

The gallery erupted in cheers, and in an instant, virtually everyone was on their feet yelling, "Frank! Frank! Frank!" all the while ignoring Edge's gavel pounding and his repeated shouts of, "Order!"

LC Tarbox was on his feet too. The veins in his temples were bulging, his head was throbbing in agony along the healed fracture lines where Samantha had cracked his skull, and the resulting anger got the better of him, causing him to make what Edge would later, after all the dust settled, laughingly describe as 'a serious tactical error.' He came towards Frank at a fast walk, his fists clenched at his sides, and Frank went to meet him.

Edge pounded so hard the head broke off his gavel, bounced off his leg and clattered to the floor, but to no avail. He had absolutely no doubts about what was going to happen. Neither did Sam Wirtz or Jack Boggess, each of whom put a hand over their mouths as one to hide their grins of anticipation. From his seat off to the side, in the VIP section Billy didn't bother disguising his amusement; instead, the big man interlaced his fingers over his stomach, leaned back, and beamed a gap-toothed grin of pure joy as he prepared to watch the fun.

Oh shit, this is gonna be good!

"Damn you!" Tarbox shouted as he came within reach, "Who the hell do you think you are!"

"I'll tell you who I am! Unlike you, I'm a man who actually fought for my country and my people while you hid behind the lines like the damned coward you are!"

"I fought – "

Frank shouted back, overriding him.

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"The only time you fought was when you attempted to assault my wife when she was nine months pregnant, you slimy, lying son of a bitch!"

A roar rose from the crowd when they heard that, and several of them shot to their feet in anger, shouting and gesticulating violently.

"Damn you, I am a *Congressman!* I've put up with all the shit off you and that blond bitch of yours I intend to – "

Before Tarbox could finish whatever he was going to say, and before anyone realized it was happening, Frank replied to the insult to Samantha in no uncertain terms. His powerful right uppercut slammed into the attorney's jaw, shattering it along with several of his teeth when his open mouth forcibly slammed shut. Frank had put all the strength of his powerful legs and his entire body into the blow, and the force literally lifted Tarbox off the ground and over the table behind him – sending him "ass over appetite" as Jack Boggess later gleefully described it in homespun Mountaineer fashion – and dropped him on his head on the floor with a sickening crack. It was over in an instant, and North Carolina's Congressman was unconscious and bleeding right there on the floor, with the cameras rolling. One foot, clad in its expensive alligator shoe, was still resting on the table, quivering and twitching.

The Sergeant at Arms – a combat veteran who privately thought Tarbox was an insufferable asshole who had finally gotten what he deserved – peered at the fallen man for a moment, then calmly turned his head and called out over his shoulder, "Medic!"

In the meantime, Frank glared defiantly at the rest of the States' Rights Coalition and the whole world watched when General Gore finally lost his temper. His fists were clenched until the skin over his knuckles on his left hand stretched white – the ones on his right were red and swollen from their impact with Tarbox's face – his eyes were blazing with fury, and he didn't bother to lean over the table, but snatched the microphone from it. It wasn't one that was meant to come off, but it did anyway, its plastic base shattering unnoticed in the force of his jerk. When he spoke into it, his voice cut like a whip, with each word bringing the blood.

"Considering how little this so-called *august body* apparently thinks of our own Southern ladies, I suppose I was being too optimistic to think you all would give a damn if a million White Christian ladies and little babies are raped to death, as long as it's somewhere you liars and cowards don't have to watch! That's not what I fought for, and if that's the kind of government you want, then you can all go to hell! I'll have no part of it!" He paused, swallowing hard. "I wish to God I had died in the war rather than stand here today and see what this Congress has done to my country! I am ashamed of you!"

With that, he flung the already-damaged mike to the table, turned his back on them, spun on his heel and marched out as Edge hastily called for an hour recess to let things cool down, and everyone in the General's path quickly got out of his way.

Frank was still furious beyond words when he got to his office, and had just sat down at his desk to type out his resignation, when the thought occurred to him that there was one more thing that needed doing while he had the power: something completely wrong in every legal sense, but morally, and for the ultimate good of his country, it was utterly right, and the only choice he could make. It didn't take long, less than a handful of seconds that he sat there, staring into space. If he did it, his position would definitely be gone, even if he wasn't resigning, and there would be a stain on his name. He wondered if he'd be criminally charged for what he was about to do, but even if he knew for sure that would be the result, he would do it anyway, because there was too much at stake, both for the White Africans and for Dixie, to do anything else. Besides, he remembered some of the last words his grandmother had spoken to him before she died, and the way her simple country drawl cut like a hickory switch. *'I didn't bring up a liar, nor a coward neither!'* He knew what he had to do, because he was Frank Gore, and he had given his word. Abandoning his keyboard, he picked up the phone and began mashing the numbers that would plug him into the proper military channel.

"*This is the Semmes, sir."*

"This is General Gore. Patch me through to Captain Montgomery, please."

"*Yes sir!"*

There was a brief pause, then, *"This is Captain Montgomery, sir."*

Frank silently thanked God that he had this particular Flag Officer commanding the battle group. Philip

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Montgomery was as much a maverick in his own way as his younger superior. The pair had hit it off from the beginning, and that good relationship would come in handy now.

"Are you still on station, Phil? What's the situation?"

"*Yes, sir. Everything's about the same; their patrol boats are shadowing us, but keeping well clear.*"

Frank knew why, too; Montgomery didn't have to tell him that anytime one of the South African boats came too near, the warships of the carrier group brought their weapons to bear on it. Considering that they were armed with 16" guns, that would have a pretty discouraging effect on most people.

"Are you ready to make your run?"

"*Yes sir!" The excitement was plain in his voice. "The men are itching to go!*"

"Then cut 'em loose and let 'em scratch. Remember, they're not to fire unless fired upon, but if they feel endangered, they can do whatever they they have to. If we've got to have casualties, I want them on the other side, not ours."

"*Yes sir. I'm glad to hear the Congress finally gave their approval; those folks are in a bad way over here.*"

Frank knew that what he was about to say might put an end to his plans, but he owed it to the Captain to be straight up with him, since it could very conceivably affect his career negatively as well.

"You need to understand this, Phil; the Congress hasn't given their approval. This is entirely my authorization, and the responsibility for it is entirely mine. I won't force you to obey what amounts to an illegal order, but..." Frank paused, sensing as much as hearing Montgomery whispering to someone, but he couldn't make out the words.

"Sir?" The *Semmes'* First Officer said, raising his eyebrows, certain he couldn't have heard his captain right.

"You heard me, Mr. Smith. Do it now!"

"Aye-aye, sir!" Picking up the radio, he keyed the private frequency and said, "Colonel Carnes, sir?"

"*Carnes here.*"

"Sir, Captain Montgomery sends his regards, and orders you to immediately have one of your men open fire on the superstructure, being careful to miss any windows or personnel. His exact words, sir."

"*Aye-aye!*"

Below on the main deck, Marine Colonel 'Lucky Charlie' Carnes grinned from ear to ear, or rather from his remaining ear to where the other one used to be. Transferred out of the South Carolina Militia and now the head of the battalion of Confederate Marines on sea duty with the *Semmes* and her battle group, he was both loved and feared by his men. Yet another maverick who tended to look at orders and procedures as "suggestions," he was irascible and profane to begin with, and whenever he turned his mangled face and single baleful eye on a subordinate, it was enough to make the strongest man cringe inside. He was perfectly willing to deliver a kick in the ass – sometimes literally – with his steel spring feet, but he was just as quick to reach out and give a helping hand, good advice, or a pat on the back and commiseration.

Due to his buccaneer attitude and looks – after all, he not only had an eye patch and a hook for a hand, but two, count 'em, *two* 'peg' legs – his men called themselves 'Lucky Charlie's Pirates.' A Naval ensign, who was there when their new name in his honor was brought to his attention, swore he saw a tear of pride fall from that single eye, but none of the 'Pirates' believed him: not from *their* commander!

Charlie had simply nodded his approval when a delegation of his officers relayed his men's request for a unit patch, and now every man wore a white skull with a black eye patch and gray Marine cap, complete with crossed bones, on a field of black on his shoulder. In turn, he made some inquiries and requisitioned the Confederacy's entire stock of US 1917 naval cutlasses that had been found packed in grease in a Navy Yard inventory. He knew, in an age of missiles and machine guns, the anachronistic weapons were more likely to be in the way than of actual use in combat, but he had another purpose in mind: morale. When he announced that they would be issued to boarding parties and potentially hostile shore parties, the reaction was overwhelming. His Marines were now officially Pirates, by God, and they would have crawled naked through broken glass if he had asked them too.

Charlie knew Captain Montgomery was cut from the same cloth, if not as flamboyant a pattern, and it didn't

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take him long to figure out exactly what was going on and, most probably, who had told him to do it; this had Frank Gore written all over it! Lucky Charlie was delighted to be standing near the superstructure himself when the call came. Turning to a nearby Marine private on guard duty, a new recruit barely eighteen and just out of training who was standing at such rigid attention due to the high-ranking officer's presence that he looked like he had a ramrod up his ass, the Colonel looked at his name tag.

"Private Keith!"

"Sir, yes sir!" The Marine straightened even more, if that was possible, and wondered what the hell he could have done wrong to merit his fierce-looking commander's attention.

"Hand me your rifle."

"Sir, yes sir!" Keith answered even as he unslung the M4 and presented it to his superior officer in precisely the approved manner.

Charlie took it, checked the load, then promptly shouldered it and blasted off half a clip at full auto right over Private Keith's head and into the superstructure, sending ricochets and paint chips flying in all directions. The private was still standing in goggle-eyed, open-mouthed shock when the Colonel shoved the rifle back into his hands.

"You make damned sure you clean that weapon this evening, Private!" He started to turn away, and then turned back. "One sir at a time is good enough for me, son."

"Sir, yes, s...uh...yes, sir...I mean..."

"Keith!" a voice bellowed across the deck. "What the hell did you just do?"

Keith's gunnery sergeant, a burley red-haired man named Hayes with a face very much like Chesty Puller's famous bulldog, came running, his combat boots pounding in his haste. Seeing Charlie, he abruptly slowed.

"Sir, I was just coming to see..."

"To check and see if this man was still alive, I hope!" Gesturing at the patrol boat, he continued. "Those niggers just fired a burst at him. Look at that." Charlie turned, and Hayes followed his pointing finger to the bullet pockmarks on the side of the bridge. Casting his solitary eye on Keith, he added, "Private Keith was just returning fire; isn't that right, Private?"

"Yes sir!"

Charlie's look turned to a glare. "I didn't give you the order to stop shooting, boy; put some fire on that boat! Show those sons of bitches how Confederate Marines can shoot!"

"And this time," Sergeant Haynes added dryly, having noticed that the number of bullet scars in the ship's paint appeared to match not only the approximate number of rounds he had heard firing, but the amount of spent brass on the deck, "Don't burn off half the clip at once! Controlled bursts; shoot like you were taught!"

Colonel Carnes nodded at Haynes' knowing look and walked off, bellowing orders in between reporting into his radio, leaving Private Keith still trying to stammer out a "Sir, yes sir!" even as he began engaging the distant vessel with professionally controlled three round bursts.

Meanwhile, Gunnery Sergeant Haynes did his best to hide a grin as he noticed, even from this distance, that the boat's occupants seemed unusually surprised at the return fire, considered that they "had fired first."

Frank stopped suddenly in mid-sentence; he could hear the order for battle stations being shouted, and it was Montgomery who had done the shouting. A moment later, his voice, normal again, sounded in the earpiece.

"*I'm sorry, sir, but I have a situation. One of the patrol boats has just fired on us, and we are currently in hot pursuit with the entire fleet. He's heading straight for Cape Town Harbor, and as fast as he's going, I doubt we'll catch up to him until he gets there."*

Frank knew damned well that no one had fired; Philip Montgomery had given the order himself, in order to keep Frank from taking the blame.

"Phil, you don't have to do this..."

"*Sorry sir, but you're breaking up badly. I have to see to this situation, and I'll attempt contact again as soon as the signal clears. Montgomery out."*

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Edge stood at Frank's desk trying his best to reason with him while Sam casually parked half his rear end on a corner of it, looking not only completely unperturbed, but faintly amused by the whole thing. In fact, he was.

That'll teach that son of a bitch to say something like that about Sammie! By God, that just made my day! Besides, it feels good to be one up on John; I wonder how long it'll take him to figure out what I know.

"Look," Edge said in his most reasonable tone, which was admittedly somewhat stretched by the situation, "I don't want your resignation; as a matter of fact, I won't accept it! We've lost this one, so let's just deal with it and move on."

"Well," Frank told him, "that might be a little difficult at this point."

Something in his voice caught Edge's attention, and then he noticed his subordinate's tight, satisfied grin. Suddenly he was very afraid that things had somehow gotten a lot more complicated.

"What do you mean?"

Frank glanced at his watch. "About five minutes ago, just before you came in, the *Semmes* was fired on by one or more South African patrol boats, and entered their waters in hot pursuit. Captain Montgomery reported that communications were breaking up, but no doubt, once he's there, he'll start picking up the refugees."

It took Edge several seconds to find his voice, and it didn't help that Sam was hooting with laughter and slapping his knee, even while he shook his head at the sheer audacity of it all.

Damn, I like that boy!

"Good God, Frank!" the President finally managed, "Are you responsible for this?"

Frank looked at him pointedly and asked a question in return. "Are you sure you're really ready for what the answer to that question might be?"

Edge threw up his hands, waving them impotently in the air, and yelled in a rare loss of control. "Damn it..."

"Mr. Edge!" The voice came through Frank's door, followed by a loud knocking. "Are you in there?"

"Yes?" Edge dropped his hands and called wearily back over his shoulder, and the door opened to reveal Arthur Hill, his personal chief of staff.

"Sir, I think you'd better come quickly. We may have a...situation."

"May have? Good God, what else can go wrong? Hell, Art, just spit it out; we're all friends in here." He glared at Frank as he finished, as if to emphasize his doubts of that status in the face of what his Secretary of Defense had just done.

"Yes sir. The switchboards are jammed, and our servers are completely overloaded; we've got thousands of communications coming into every office, more than we can keep up with, and they're running in excess of 90% in favor of General Gore here." He bobbed his head at Frank to emphasize the point. "A lot of them are from churches offering to sponsor the Afrikaners, but some of them are pretty threatening... actually, they're downright, directly threatening. *'You'll support Frank if you know what's good for you!'* and *'We fought one revolution under Frank Gore, and by God, we'll fight another one if you try to remove him from office!'* That kind of thing. Some of the members' constituents have even threatened to lynch them when they go home if they let that happen." He glanced over his shoulder and added, "I don't know if you can hear it or not, but the crowd in the gallery is getting pretty ugly too, and demonstrators are already gathering outside, some of them armed."

"Shit!" Edge exclaimed with great feeling before turning back to his subordinate. "Frank, do you realize what you've done?" The question was, of course, rhetorical; Edge knew very well that Frank knew exactly what he had done, and, unfortunately from Edge's perspective, the Acting President also knew with equal certainty just who was going to get the blame for it. He was also staggering a bit inside after once again being smacked in the face with the cold, hard reality that Frank, as much as he didn't want it himself, was still the real leader of the Confederacy in the people's eyes.

Sam finally decided to drop the information bombshell he had been holding back.

"John," he drawled calmly, apparently unaffected by all the drama going on around him over the past few minutes, "you do realize that, with Tarbox out of the way, there aren't enough votes to sustain the filibuster right now."

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Edge came to a screeching halt, his index finger raised and mouth open in mid-tirade, and an instant later he was charging down the hall at an open run, yelling at his secretary, calling out for Dr. MacFie, and shouting at the Sergeant at Arms to get the members the hell back in there *right now,* if not sooner.

Sam arose, stretched slowly and deliberately, and winked at Frank.

"Somebody's got to look after you. I swear, boy, you're gonna give me gray hair one of these days."

"Gonna?" Frank asked innocently, and Sam laughed.

"Smartass!" With that, he left to go corral Jack Boggess; he anticipated a problem, and had a plan to share with the Mountaineer that should deal with it before the session resumed.

"General Gore, I must protest this intrusion of Confederate warships into the territorial waters of the sovereign nation of South Africa!"

South African President Mbeki's voice was shrill, partly by nature, and partly from irritation that the highest-ranking person available to take his call was the very man who was undoubtedly responsible for the situation in the first place.

"Your protest is noted, sir; however, our ships were fired upon first."

"Your ships fired first!"

Fighting the mischievous temptation to say, 'no, you fired first,' and see how many times he could get President Mbeki to knock that ball back and forth with him, he calmly told him, "That's contrary to the reports I currently have, although, of course, I can assure you I'll be carefully monitoring the situation, and I will insist upon a full investigation upon their return."

"But they are in our territorial waters now!"

"Yes sir, that is the information I currently have too."

"Get them out! *Now!*"

"That may be difficult, Mr. President; our carrier group is having communications problems. I can only assume your forces are jamming them..."

"Our forces are doing no such thing!"

"...and if they will stop their interference, I'll contact the ships as soon as possible and ascertain the situation. Until then, though, there's little I can do from here."

Mbeki was not a stupid man, and knew good and well he was getting the runaround, but he didn't know quite what the hell to do about it.

"General Gore, I demand that these ships be called back, or else!"

"Or else what, Mr. President?" Frank replied laconically, as if they were discussing the weather instead of a looming international crisis.

"Or else South Africa's forces will respond!"

"President Mbeki, you and I are both military men; may I be blunt with you?"

"Please do!"

"Very well then, sir. I'm familiar with the capabilities of the South African forces, and you have nothing that can begin to match the armament of our carrier group. Should they attack anyway, the consequences would be disastrous to your military: something I'm sure the potentially hostile countries on your borders would like to see, and would almost certainly take advantage of."

Frank correctly took the African leader's silence for agreement, and then went on.

"We in the Confederacy have no wish to destabilize the southern African region; therefore, in order to prevent that from happening, and to curtail further bloodshed, I highly recommend that you withdraw your forces for a distance of, oh, say five miles from the refugee camp. Our people will not molest them, but, from what I know of the group commander, he will simply load the refugees and leave."

"We will not retreat on our own soil!"

"How long would you like it to remain your soil, Mr. President?"

He heard the Negro audibly suck in his breath in shock.

"Are you threatening me?"

"Not at all, sir; I am simply explaining your options in this conflict. If our warships have peaceful access to

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the refugees, they will load them and be outside your territorial waters within a day or two at most. You will not only be rid of a group you perceive as a problem, but you can look good to the world because of your humanitarian gesture in *inviting* us to come in and take these people; problem solved, and you come out smelling like a rose.

"On the other hand, if your forces resist this humanitarian effort, we will be forced to pacify the entire area – probably several hundred square miles – in order to insure our security and that of the refugees. If we're forced to do that, we'll be there for weeks or months, certainly, and possibly even years.

"What!"

"In fact, if we put that much effort into it, we might even slice off a whole section of your country, using the precedent of the UN severing Kosovo from Serbia, and make it an Afrikaner homeland, under our protection. I understand the area has enough diamond and other mines there to support it, and to make it worth our while to station enough forces there to provide for its security."

Frank let his voice trail off speculatively, and, after a moment of silence, Mbeki said, "I insist we be compensated for our trouble in caring for these people!"

The South African President had just capitulated and both of them knew it; however, for the sake of saving face, the farce had to go on a bit longer.

"Of course, sir, although, as the Secretary of Defense, I am not allowed to allocate money. Under our form of government, only the Confederate Congress may do that. By all means, send them an itemized bill through the usual diplomatic channels at your earliest convenience, and I'm certain they'll give it their fullest attention." Frank had no doubt of that. He hoped it was printed on soft paper, because after they finished laughing at it, some of them would most likely take it the bathroom to wipe their asses with.

President Mbeki realized pretty much the same thing, but he also knew this was as good of a deal as he was going to get. He finished with a grumpy, "Very well; we'll pull our troops back for forty-eight hours – but no longer!" and hung up without saying goodbye.

Edge slammed his gavel down.

"The Afrikaner Refugee Allocation Bill passes." As he considered the little technicality that the said Afrikaner refugees were probably being loaded onto Confederate warships right now, he breathed a sincere sigh of relief. Of course, victory was always sweet, even if it had come about in an unusual and somewhat humbling fashion.

"May I ask a question, Mr. President?" Congressman Garvey asked as he rose to his feet, still stinging from his loss, "Just where do you expect these people to live? Florida isn't taking them!"

"Don't expect to shift them onto Tennessee either," Congressman Arvin added from the crowd. "We're not going to take care of them for you!"

Sam got up. "You all don't have to worry about that; South Carolina will take them."

"All of them?" Garvey asked incredulously. "That's over a million people!"

Sam shrugged indifferently. "I don't care; we'll take 'em all; we need all the hardworking White folks we can get."

Jack Boggess rose to his feet, right on cue, just as he and Sam had planned. "With all due respect to my good friend and colleague from South Carolina, you'll play hell! West Virginia will take them. We've lost population, we've got thousands of vacant job openings, and this will put us ahead of the game. Contrary to what your state seems to believe, South Carolina doesn't run this august body, and I will not tolerate the Palmetto State trying to hog this vital resource for itself!"

"South Carolina spoke for them first!" Sam's voice was growing heated, and Jack's answer even more so.

"I don't give a damn what South Carolina did – "

"Now just a cotton picking minute!" Kentucky's member Randal Barnes spoke up, spurred into action by the apparent fact that this was something valuable enough that two friends were willing to argue heatedly over, and the fear he might be left out. "We've lost folks too, and on behalf of the Bluegrass State, I demand our fair share of these people!"

Georgia spoke up next, only to be interrupted by Alabama, and by the time they were through an hour and a

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half later, the refugees had already been divided amongst ten states before the first one had even set foot on board a ship.

Edge tapped his gavel again.

"Now we have the matter of the violence in these chambers. Sergeant at Arms, please ask General Gore to come in."

The official nodded and left, and, a moment later, Frank marched in, stopped in front of the President's podium, and assumed the position of parade rest, legs apart and hands behind his back. Someone in the crowded gallery stood up too, then a couple of others, and, in a moment, Frank was joined by a silent standing ovation of hundreds, who glared threateningly at the members, and were, to all appearances, ready, willing and even eager to come down out of their seats and seriously kick somebody's ass. Several of the men and even a few of the women actually began removing watches and glasses, taking off jackets, and rolling up their sleeves: a fact not missed by any of the Congress, the increasingly nervous security guards, or by the TV cameras. After all the drama up to this point, fully half the South was tuned into the broadcast by now, waiting to see what was going to happen.

"General Gore," Edge began, his voice carefully showing no emotion, "I have met with the members of the Executive Committee, Dr. MacFie and Mr. Nash" – Edge made sure to mention their names, because he would be damned if he was going to shoulder the blame for this unpopular action all by himself – "and it is our sad duty to charge you with assault and battery on Congressman Tarbox of the Great State of North Carolina. Do you wish to retain counsel?"

A growl issued from the crowd, and Frank took a moment to smile at them and calm them with an upraised hand and a silently mouthed 'It's okay,' before responding calmly with, "No sir."

"Do you wish a regular judicial hearing?"

"No sir."

"Do you wish to be tried before this entire body, or will you submit to the judgment of the executive officers?"

"I'll submit to the decision of the executive officers."

"Would you like time to prepare your case?"

"I'm ready right now."

"All right. You know the charge; how do you plead?"

"Guilty with extenuating circumstances."

"And those circumstances are?"

"What the hell do you think, you dumbass?" someone in the crowd shouted, and it took a full ten seconds of gavel banging for the roar of agreement to subside. "Order! Order, please!" Edge didn't bother to threaten to clear the galleries, because he had no desire to have to deal with a riot, and he knew that was exactly what it would be if he tried. As soon as the noise died, Frank didn't wait for Edge to ask the question again.

"Tarbox insulted my wife; I won't take that from *any* man, and I don't give a *damn* who he is."

A thundering deluge of applause from the gallery in the midst of the continuing standing ovation once again drowned out Edge pounding his new gavel. It didn't help that several of the members, led by Sam and Jack, were on their feet and cheering just as hard, or that Doctor MacFie, sitting beside him and knowing full well that every eye and camera was upon their podium, was sagely nodding his bald head in approval. The motion irritated Edge, who felt like doing the very same thing, and being seen doing it, but he was bound by duty to at least make a show of being unbiased.

"Order! Order!" he shouted, and, after almost a minute, everything finally quieted down once more.

"Yes, General, he insulted your wife, who we all love and respect dearly, but I think he's paid the price for that insult. I just heard from the hospital; his jaw is broken in three places, he's missing several teeth, and he has a fractured skull and a concussion. If you had done this anywhere else, I would applaud you for it – for that matter, if you weren't there, I'd have done it *myself* – but this is the Congressional Chamber for the Government of the Confederate States of America, and the rules of proper behavior must be enforced accordingly." He looked at MacFie and Secretary Nash, and it was obvious by their ready nods that the three had already come to their decision before ever coming back to the floor. "It is the decision of the executive

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officers that you are hereby fined the sum of one thousand dollars and barred from these chambers for a period of twenty-four hours. Case closed."

Before Edge's gavel banged again, Doctor MacFie drew his checkbook with a grand flourish designed to catch the maximum number of eyes and cameras present, and loudly said, "Don't worry about it, Frank; I'll take care of this for you."

"Now just a minute!" Jack Boggess called out over the cheers, mentally kicking himself in the butt for not being the one to think of it even as he reached for his wallet. "I'll handle it!"

"No, wait!" another voice chimed in, followed by several more as those in the Congress who had future political aspirations followed suit, clamoring to be the one to pay the fine. Suddenly there was a loud shout from the audience.

"No sir! We've got it!"

An old man in a faded work shirt and a worn pair of bib overalls who had come into the capital to see his new government at work, pulled a crisp new one hundred dollar Confederate bill out of his wallet and threw it from the balcony visitors' gallery, watching as it fluttered down to the chamber floor. "This is for you, Frank!"

Frank held up both hands and shook his head.

"This isn't necessary," he yelled back. "I can pay the fine."

"Yeah, but you ain't gonna," another man in the crowd, this one a bald used car dealer in a loud checkered jacket, called out as he flung a handful of bills towards the chamber floor. "After all you've done for Dixie, you don't owe anybody one damn thing!"

Suddenly it looked like a currency blizzard, and bills began raining down all over. The group of a couple of hundred grade school kids on a field trip began fishing around in their pockets too, and in an instant, it was like pennies from Heaven as a scattered hail of change began bouncing on the tables and floor, painfully peppering several members and chamber functionaries in the process.

"Here, General Gore! We'll help!"

Frank stood, shaking his head, smiling, and touched to the very heart, and as near as he had come to crying in public that he could remember.

"Thank you," he said, "Thank you all!" Even as he repeated himself, he felt a familiar arm around his shoulders, urging him toward the door.

"Come on," Sam told him with a broad grin before nodding at the growing bedlam as the rest of the members shamelessly vied to court public opinion by standing up for Frank Gore while the said public stood, jumped up and down, and cheered his name until their throats raw, and the money was still raining down. "Let's go get a beer. I think they've got you covered here."

"Come on, let's go! We don't have all day, people!"

Charlie had to shout at the top of his lungs to be heard over the noise of the huge mass of civilians, the yells of the other officers and the sergeants, and the F/A 18 fighter planes roaring overhead like monstrous, streamlined birds of prey, providing security for those below.

Whether anyone actually heard his orders or not didn't really matter; more of being in command and motivating men than most officers either knew or liked to admit was simply performance art. His men knew what to do already, but they expected him to be there bellowing at them, so that's what he did, striding back and forth while smoking the long, slender Maduro cigar clenched between his teeth. Actually, things were running much smoother than he had dared hope for. Even as the Confederate Marines took over security from the unarmed White African men on the perimeter, the Afrikaners themselves were being formed into lines at the docks. There, they were crowding into a steady stream of landing craft and conscripted civilian boats that hauled them at full speed to the waiting ships before racing back for more. Rather than sending them women and children first, Lucky Charlie had decided that it would be less stressful – and thus produce fewer problems for his people – if they kept the families together and took them that way.

While he shouted more encouragement, he was happy to note that the refugees were naturally orderly, and, for the most part, lined up like they were told and waited patiently for their turn with no pushing or shoving.

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There was little luggage; other than a bag or two, or a backpack, all most of them had were the clothes on their backs, the fire in their eyes, and the hope in their hearts. Still, as far as Charlie was concerned, they behaved with a quiet dignity that many rich men only aspire to but never achieve.

"Mr. Pirate! Mr. Pirate sir!"

Startled, Charlie looked down to see a little boy, no more than six years old, standing in front of him, a terrified look on a tiny face smeared with tears and snot. The kid was clinging tightly to his grey fatigues, jerking the cloth with desperate insistence.

"What can I do for you, son?"

"I can't find my mama! The Kaffirs took her away!"

The scarred side of Charlie's face seemed to crawl as it twisted in anger.

"When?"

"Just now!"

Spinning on his steel heel, Charlie called out to the nearest officer he could see, "Captain! Give me a platoon – on the double!"

"Here," Charlie said, turning back to pick up the boy and swing him up on his shoulders with his good arm. "Show us where, son. Be sure and point to my right side; I don't see too well out of the other."

"Thank you, Mr. Pirate," the little boy said from his position astride Charlie's neck.

"Name's Lucky Charlie, boy!" As he set off on a mechanical run, he yelled back over his shoulder, "Lock and load, Pirates! The niggers have kidnapped this little boy's mama, and we're going to go kick some African ass!"

An ear-splitting Rebel yell startled everyone within hearing distance, and sent a startled vulture who had been perched on a nearby rooftop to flight. He rose to safety, then, with the unerring instinct of a successful scavenger looking for a meal, he began following the man with the mechanical limbs.

Twenty-six year-old Rachel Vandyke wept bitterly as they dragged her along, less in fear of her impending rape and death – probably death *by* rape – than at the bitter disappointment of being so close to safety, only to have it abruptly snatched away from her. Her only consolation was that her little boy had gotten away, because they would have undoubtedly done the same thing to him.

She had fought, but against the six Black South African soldiers who had snatched her from the edge of the refugee camp in a lightening raid, she never had a chance. Her bleeding nose, mouth and scalp, along with what she thought might be broken ribs on her left side, had been delivered in less than three seconds, driving all the resistance out of her. All she had left to look forward to now was death...in hours or maybe days, depending on how long her ordeal lasted.

Suddenly the captors pulling her along by either elbow abruptly dropped her, sending her sprawling on the cracked, potholed cement of the road. Startled by the cessation of motion as much as the pain, it took her a second to realize guns were firing nearby.

Twisting her head to the left, she saw two of the indifferently uniformed Kaffirs down, the one with a hole in his neck and not moving, and the other, with a gaping gash where half a foot of his lower spine used to be, squalling and frantically trying to drag himself along with his arms, pulling his dead legs behind him. She looked the other way, and saw that two more were rolling around, crying and screaming, their AK47s lying beside them, forgotten in their agony. That was all she had time to see before a white-palmed black hand grabbed her by her blond hair and yanked her all the way off the ground. The next instant, she felt the cold edge of a bayonet being pressed under her chin.

"Get back!" her captor screamed hoarsely. "Get back, or I kill dis bitch!"

She could see her rescuers now; a bunch of Confederate Marines, who had halted in the road when the man grabbed her; they were no more than fifty meters away. Her son was there too, and, bizarrely, he sat like a parrot on the shoulders of what looked for all the world like a pirate, complete with scarred face, an eye patch, a hooked hand, and two artificial legs. Incongruously, the man was smoking a cigar.

"Mama!" Johnny cried out at the sight of her, and her captor pulled her tighter to him.

"I mean it! I kill dis White bitch!"

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The ‘pirate’ leader calmly turned his head to the side and said one word, loudly and clearly.

“Sniper!”

A split second later, before he could fully close his mouth, something screamed so closely by Rachel’s right ear that it tugged at a ringlet of her hair in passing. There was a loud slapping noise just behind her, and something warm sprayed against the back of her neck as if from a high pressure hose, all before she heard the crack of the rifle. The bayonet at her throat fell away, as did the man holding it. As he collapsed, his limp body bumped her legs from behind as he folded like an accordion, and she fell forward, catching herself on her palms this time, and scraping their skin on the road.

With both of them down, there was nothing to shelter the final soldier who had been hiding behind them. He blinked once in surprise, then, eyes wide and rolling in his black face, he threw his rifle away as if it were hot and jerked both his hands up in surrender.

The Confederate Marines were notoriously un-fond of rapists, and, without any orders from their Colonel, one way or another, more than a dozen bullets blew his torso into bloody rags, their exit wounds spattering the road with red for several yards beyond him.

“Hold your fire! First, Second, and Third Squads; form a perimeter!” Charlie ordered. “Fourth Squad, you’re with me!”

He advanced up the road as if out for a Sunday stroll, while the half-dozen men with him kept their muzzles trained on the fallen Africans. Reaching the woman, he heard his mechanical legs creak slightly as he knelt beside her, and he made a mental note to lubricate them later.

The little boy was instantly off his back and hugging his mother’s neck.

“Mama! Mama!”

“Are you alright, ma’am?” Charlie asked her, and she nodded over her son’s shoulder.

“I...I think so. They beat me, but you got here before they...before...”

“Good,” he interrupted in order to save her the pain of finishing, flipped the cigar away, and then extended his good hand to help her to her feet. “Let’s get out of here before any of their friends show up.”

Disentangling herself from little Johnny, Rachel looked into the scarred, one-eyed face of her rescuer.

“You saved my life, and I don’t even know your name.”

“This is Lucky Charlie!” Johnny piped up excitedly, “He’s a pirate, and he’s my friend!”

“Johnny!” she admonished him, but Charlie only grinned.

“He’s right, ma’am.” Twisting his shoulder towards her to show his unit patch, he added, “We’re all pirates.” Then he looked at Johnny, winked broadly with his remaining eye, twisted his scarred lips, and said, “Arrgh!”

The little boy promptly squinted one eye closed and replied with an “Arrgh!” of his own, trying to imitate his new hero as best he could, and Charlie laughed before taking off his cap and setting it on Johnny’s head.

“Alright, junior pirate; let’s get your mama out of here.” Glancing at the Marines, he called out, “First, Second and Third Squads, come with me; give me a diamond formation with a point and a pair of flankers on each side! Fourth Squad, you’ve got thirty seconds to finish this damned mess here, then fall in as rear guard.”

An enthusiastic “Yes sir!” came in return, and, as soon as the woman and boy were facing away, Fourth Squad drew their precious cutlasses they had been aching for a chance to use. There were a couple of brief yells and several impacts that sounded like some particularly energetic butcher chopping meat, and then they were through and walking drag in less than a minute.

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CHAPTER 41

My God, this place is a madhouse. I love it!

Lucky Charlie sat in his tiny quarters, smiling his twisted, disturbing smile as he cleaned his pistol. Laying the pieces on the table in precise order, he knew he was lucky to have even this little bit of privacy, and wouldn't if he hadn't been commander of the Marine Contingent. The Confederates had done what most said was impossible; packed one million people, give or take a few hundred, onto a carrier group composed of the aircraft carrier *CSS Semmes*, two missile cruisers, two anti-aircraft warships, and two destroyers. Almost every spare inch of every ship in the carrier group was packed with people, including the decks and most of the corridors, with the logistics being so difficult that everyone was receiving only one meal a day, along with being issued one MRE per person to last them the remainder of the twenty-four hours. Still, that was what the Confederates came for, and they hadn't lost a sailor, a marine, or even a refugee getting them, so it was a damned successful mission in anybody's book.

He ran the bore brush down the barrel a few times, and was holding it up to the light and peering through it critically when he heard a knock at his door.

"Come."

The door opened, and Charlie was at a momentary loss for words when he saw Rachel Vandyke standing there; in all the barely-controlled chaos, he hadn't realized she had even been taken aboard the *Semmes*. Instantly, he rose to his metal feet, thankful he hadn't yet taken his legs off for the evening.

"Mrs. Vandyke! How are you?"

She smiled.

"I'm fine, thanks to you. By the way, it's Miss, not Mrs., but it's Rachel to you."

"Rachel then." Charlie was hardly shocked at the idea of her being a single mother; he had been a soldier far too long to moralize over much of anything that minor. Motioning with his good hand, he waved her to the only other chair in the room. "Would you like to sit down?"

"Yes, Colonel, I would."

Closing the door behind her, she took the chair even as her host told her, "Just call me Charlie." Watching her gracefully folding herself into the seat and thinking somewhat wistfully of how pretty she was after she had cleaned herself up using the limited and massively overloaded facilities of the ship, he added, "How's my little buddy, Johnny?"

"He's asleep; I left him with Mrs. Schmitt." She smiled. "He's probably dreaming about 'Lucky Charlie the Pirate;' at least, he has yet to shut up about you. I can barely get that cap off him long enough to comb his hair; he even sleeps in it. You're his hero...and mine."

Charlie blushed slightly at that, something he hadn't known he was still capable of.

"I was just doing my job."

"No," she told him, shaking her head, "that was above and beyond your job." She hung her head, and it was her turn to blush; this was something she was obviously not used to. Finally collecting her nerves, she raised her eyes to his single one and held them there. "I'd like to...to *repay* you for what you did for me."

Charlie knew exactly what she was talking about, and he shook his head.

"Nobody owes me that, Rachel; *that* would be above and beyond." Gesturing at himself simultaneously with his hand and his hook, he added, "I'm old enough and realistic enough to know what I look like, and it ain't pretty."

"I thought you were the most beautiful sight in the world when you came to get me. Every little girl dreams of being rescued by a handsome knight in armor, and carried back to his castle, but it doesn't happen to most of us."

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Charlie tapped one of his metal legs with his metal hand and then looked pointedly around the room.

"I reckon I've got the armor, but this isn't much of a castle, and I'm not exactly handsome."

She rose to her feet and began unbuttoning her blouse.

"You're close enough for me, Charlie, and that's who I'm doing this for; not for you, but for me."

Outside in the corridor, when the minutes turned an hour and the door still showed no sign of opening, Marine Gunnery Sergeant Haynes grinned broadly, turned to the sailor standing near him and proudly extended his hand.

"Ha! Told ya so! Pay up!"

Swearing under his breath, the bosun's mate forked over a fifty, shaking his head in disbelief the whole time.

Who would have thought it?

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CHAPTER 42

Over the next few days, between his unorthodox victory on the chamber floor and the impending arrival of the homeward bound carrier group, Frank, much to his embarrassment, was buried under a deluge of supportive mail and monetary donations (totaling well over a hundred thousand dollars), along with twenty-three pairs of boxing gloves. To top it off, his friend Jack Boggess, on behalf of the West Virginia delegation, publicly presented him with a set of polished, engraved, gold plated brass knuckles. The gesture cinched the whole thing in the public eye, and, thanks to a reporter for a Huntington, West Virginia paper whose column went national, Frank ended up having the term 'brass knucks negotiation' named after him. His many supporters took to wearing miniature brass knuckles pins, tie tacks, belt buckles, and tee shirts, starting a minor boom in the souvenir trade. Despite his fervent denials, pundits speculated about the formation of a 'Brass Knuckles Party' that appeared certain to usher Frank Gore into the Confederate Presidency come the election, and the general consensus was that he would run unopposed, as only a damned fool would think he could beat him. All of the Congressmen, even those like Edge, MacFie, and Boggess, who knew Frank didn't intend to run for any office, watched him even more closely, and behind the scenes, quietly jockeyed for position and courted his favor, and, hopefully, his ultimate endorsement.

Just as embarrassing was what happened outside the Congress. He knew people had considered him a folk hero before, but now it was worse. For one thing, he couldn't seem to pay for anything now; his money was suddenly no good in any restaurant or bar in Richmond. Either it was "It's on the house, General," or "I'll get that for you, General," followed by a stubborn, "No sir, I insist!" when he tried to refuse.

Even worse was what happened on the streets; men and women would come up to him and thank him, shake his hand, or hug him. Once an eighty year-old lady had even stopped them and asked Samantha if she would "mind if an old lady kisses your husband," and Frank's vastly amused wife told her to help herself. She promptly did so, smearing his lips with bright red lipstick in the process before telling him he was a true Southern gentleman and credit to his gender, and ordering Samantha to never forget how lucky she was to have a man like that. Samantha assured her in all sincerity that was one thing she'd never forget.

As for Frank, as soon as the refugees finally arrived, he threw up his hands at the absurdity of the whole mess and left for Norfolk to meet the new immigrants.

The port city hadn't seen so much confusion since the original Yankee invasion. The streets were jammed with press and people who just wanted to see the event, as well as the vendors who had come to take their money and hordes of city and state officials who wanted to make sure the fees and taxes due them were collected. Thousands of church buses and tens of thousands of church members from all over Dixie joined the throng as well, ready to take the refugee families they had agreed to sponsor to their homes. Not everyone was happy, of course, and there were a few dozen protesters, but such was the general carnival atmosphere of the event that very few people even noticed they were there. Certainly not the press; at no time in history had a million new immigrants showed up all in one place in one day, and the Confederate and international media alike jockeyed for position at the main event. Bribes and even the occasional blow were exchanged in a frantic attempt to get a little closer.

Frank and Samantha avoided the crowd by flying in from Fort A.P. Hill in a giant Chinook helicopter. Frank would have preferred something considerably smaller, but the huge machine needed to carry a number of Congressmen, their staff and guests, still more press, and the small army of assorted bureaucrats, functionaries, hangers-on, and professional ass kissers that orbit around every government, no matter whose. This was definitely Frank's show, but, since it was such a popular one, it was *the* place for any aspiring politician to see and, more importantly, be seen.

They all sat behind Frank now, while he stood at the podium and looked out at the seemingly endless sea of

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white faces of the refugees that stared back in rapt attention, a mixture of uncertain fear, thinly veiled excitement, and cautious hope in their eyes.

"This will be a hard thing for you," he told them, "a very hard thing. You've come halfway around the world to make your homes in a strange new land, to live in it, fight for it, to lay down your lives for it if need be. You will have to adjust, to learn our ways, in order to fit in here, but know this: I have confidence that the race that conquered the wilds of Africa, that settled and bent the most savage land on earth to the plow, is up to that challenge. The experience, the courage and the tenacity of the Afrikaner are not something for my country to tolerate; they are something for my country to gain! Generations from now, when your descendants will be Southerners in every sense of the word, they'll brag about how their own grandfathers came all the way from Africa to be part of the making of a new country, and to become part of a new nation, and the boy with a trace of Afrikaner blood will be as proud of it as the one who bears the blood of the heroes of the first Confederacy.

"You have come a long way over a long time, from the forests of Europe to the fens of Africa. Now, you have made your final journey on this earth. You are with us, part of us forever. Your blood will mingle with our own in marriage and on the battlefield until we will truly be one, single people, who will stand or fall together as Providence declares. Welcome home, brothers. Welcome home, Dixiekaners!"

The cheering seemed to go on forever, and, although the afternoon reception that followed was only supposed to last an hour, it took him until well after midnight to get away from the grateful men. His hand had been shaken so much that it was swollen and literally bleeding in spots where even his tough skin had been worn away.

"We will never forget what you did for us, sir," Colonel Van Hoot told him, tears streaming down unheeded down his scarred face. "We will *never forget*!"

Finally, it was finished. The newest Confederates began mounting buses and vans and planes, and moving out, and Frank and Samantha finally had time to meet with two of the people they most wanted to see. He gave the order, and in less than ten minutes, Captain Montgomery and Colonel Carnes were standing before him.

"Phil, Charlie, it's damned good to see you two!"

"You too, Frank," Captain Montgomery told him while everyone shook hands.

"You both did a great job!"

Samantha looked at Charlie. "I hear you saw a little personal action; I've heard about your charge to the rescue."

So had everyone else; Southerners had always loved their heroes, and Lucky Charlie's exploit had been reported, re-reported, exaggerated, and expanded upon until, in two weeks, it was already on its way to being the stuff of legend. Samantha only reported the truth, of course, as a matter of personal principle, but she also saw no point in directly mentioning the implausibility of the more fantastic reporting of other journalists with a little less dedication to reality.

"Nothing, really," Charlie told her with a shrug, but was interrupted by a child's shout of, "Lucky Charlie! There you are!" followed by a woman's cry of "Johnny!"

Johnny, his Marine cap with the colonel's insignia hanging half-over his eyes, was closer to Charlie than he was to his mother, and anyway, getting to his hero seemed to be a much more attractive option than letting his mother catch him at that particular moment. He opened his arms on the run and leaped, and Charlie snatched him up and held him.

"Arrgh," he growled in full pirate mode, "it's Cabin Boy Johnny, always turning up like a bad penny!"

Johnny laughed and hugged his hero tightly even as his panting mother caught up and reached for him.

"I'm sorry," Rachel said, and then blanched as she realized she was talking to two of the most famous people in the world. "Oh my God, I'm so sorry!"

"About what, ma'am?" Frank asked with a broad smile on his face at seeing the normally cynical, gruff Charlie's interaction with the little boy. Beside him, Samantha was actually giggling. "He's only being a kid." Sticking out his hand to Johnny, he said, "Pleased to meet you."

"Pleased to meet you too, sir," Johnny said, gravely extending his tiny hand to be encased in Frank's large, calloused palm. He took Samantha's hand when she offered it as well, and promptly told her, "You're a pretty

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lady."

"Johnny!" Rachel gasped, becoming more embarrassed by the minute, but the Gores only laughed harder.

Samantha put her fingertips to her lips and giggled as she said, "Why, thank you, Johnny!" and Frank added, "You're obviously a man with good taste."

"Johnny," Charlie said, once he had recovered his breath from laughing, "do you know who this is?" When the boy shook his head, the Colonel continued, "These are my friends, Frank and Samantha Gore."

Johnny's eyes got big. "Wow! I've heard of you; you're almost as big of heroes as my friend, Lucky Charlie!"

Frank and Samantha literally howled with laughter, and Charlie blushed, at least on the side of his face that was still capable of it. Once he got his breath back, Frank looked meaningfully from Charlie to Rachel.

"Well, are you going to introduce this lady or not?"

The still-blushable side of Charlie's face went even redder, and he quickly turned to Rachel. Seeing her reluctant to come forward, he set the boy down and reached for her, gently taking her by the upper arm with his good hand and encouraging her more than escorting her to his side. Once she was there, he seemed to be in no hurry to take his hand away either. Seeing their brief interaction, Frank and Samantha flicked their eyes to one another in mutual understanding. Their friend's tenderness towards the woman's son, as well as toward her in that one motion, told them all they needed to know. Samantha liked her already. She had worked with Charlie for an extended period and even fought beside him once, and she knew what kind of man he was. As far as she was concerned, any woman who could look past his scarred face and mangled body to see that too was more than all right in her book.

"Sammie, Frank, I'd like you to meet Rachel Vandyke. Rachel, these are my friends – and my boss – Frank and Samantha Gore."

As the pair smiled with warm, genuine welcome and shook her hand, Rachel felt like she was going weak in the knees, like she was about to faint. Her left hand went self-consciously to her hair.

"It...it's an honor, General, ma'am. I...I'm sorry I'm such a mess!"

"You look just fine," Samantha assured her, "and it's Sammie and Frank to our friends." Glancing at Charlie, her lips twitched mischievously. "And any friend of Lucky Charlie Carnes is a friend of ours."

"Thank you...Sammie."

"See?" Samantha touched her arm reassuringly. "That wasn't so hard, was it?"

While Rachel smiled and shook her head, Frank turned to Captain Montgomery.

"Phil, how long will you be needed here to get things squared away with the group?"

With a doubtful look, the naval officer replied, "We've got a lot to do..."

"That wasn't what I asked. How long do *you personally* have to be here?"

Montgomery rubbed his chin in thought. "I could delegate everything by tomorrow evening if I had to..."

"You have to. I want you in Richmond the day after for debriefing, Admiral."

Montgomery blinked. "I'm a Captain, Frank."

"You won't be by the end of the week," Frank said matter-of-factly, clapping him on the shoulder. "Now go get yourself squared away; I want you in my office at oh-nine hundred Wednesday morning. Be sure and wear your dress whites, because there's going to be a ceremony." Glancing at Samantha, he added, "I suspect there might even be a few pictures taken."

Phil Montgomery stood there in shock, his mouth opening and closing soundlessly like a landed fish. Finally, he managed a "Thank you, sir," and took Frank's hand when he extended it. Then he saluted, turned and walked away, giving the impression that his feet weren't quite touching the ground.

Charlie watched him go before turning back to Frank.

"That was an excellent decision; he's a damned good man."

"If I'm going to make this a real military, I have to promote based on performance and loyalty, not time in grade, *General* Carnes."

Charlie's single eye went wide, and, completely losing his cocky, cynical composure, he stammered, "Frank, I...I'm not qualified for that rank!"

"I'm the one in charge of this military, so you're qualified for any rank *I* say you're qualified for. What

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you've done, not only in Africa but in South Carolina, more than qualifies you." Nodding pointedly at the juncture of Charlie's legs, he added, "It's a good thing you've only got one left, because if you still had both of them, they'd be so big you'd have to walk bowlegged."

Samantha and Rachel both snorted with laughter; laughter that grew uncontrollably when the studiously frowning Johnny suddenly realized what the Secretary of Defense meant, and shouted out, "Charlie, he just said you have big balls!"

"Yep," Frank said, once he recovered his breath, "that's about the size of it. Look, why don't you all ride back to Richmond with us? We've got a guest room in our suite at the Jefferson. You can get a good night's sleep there, and we can start your part of the debriefing in the morning, right after breakfast."

"And while they're doing that," Samantha said, "I'll take a few hours off and Rachel, Cynthia and I can go out and do some girl stuff. How about it, Rachel?"

Rachel was so overwhelmed, her head felt like it was spinning. "Thank you! You're all so kind!"

"Have you got room?" Charlie asked, looking dubiously at the waiting Chinook. "From the mess of people I saw getting off that thing, it looked as crowded as our ships with the Afrikaners on board."

"I have a plan. Sammie, you deal with the press more than I do; do you think you can find a reporter and his camera crew who would be willing to trade their seats for an exclusive, one-on-one interview with Charlie, Phil and I, say on Monday, after the debriefings and promotions are over?"

Rachel was amazed. She knew Frank had authority to have anyone removed from the helicopter with no more than a hint, but the fact that he wasn't willing to do that spoke volumes as to just what sort of man he was, and what it said about Charlie that her rescuer counted him as a personal friend.

I think maybe I'll like it here.

"I don't think that will be a problem; any reporter in the Confederacy would give his right arm for that."

"I don't need his arm, just his seats. If you can, pick someone honest and professional, but a little less well known: someone hungry to make a name for themselves. For some reason, I like that kind of reporter."

Samantha knew good and well he was talking about her – after all, that's how they met – and she lowered her eyes and affectionately bumped his shoulder with hers.

"I think I can do that."

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DAY 1047

CHAPTER 43

"Frank, there's another guest I think you need to meet before we end the show. This one's come to visit us from the United States."

Frank felt like sighing, but managed to restrain himself in order to avoid hurting the news talk show hostess' feelings. With the Afrikaner influx into the Navy and Marines, the after-action reports, the promotions, and a thousand and one other related things that needed to be addressed ASAP, not to mention his regular duties, for the past two weeks he had been busier than a one-legged man in an ass-kicking contest. Still, he didn't want to cause offense especially since the hostess happened to be both the Confederate Press Secretary and his own wife, who was interviewing him right now as the guest on her weekly public TV talk show, *Straight From Richmond.*

I know she's been at least as busy as I have…well, busier, because she's got Linda. I got so used to having them with me most of the time during the war, it seems like I hardly see them anymore, except first thing in the morning and late in the evenings.

Looking closely at Samantha across the desk from his seat on the guest couch, Frank could see she looked a little misty eyed, but unusually eager, all at the same time. He didn't know what this was all about, but, while he might be the head of military matters, she was mistress of the media, and he trusted her judgment in her field as implicitly as she trusted him in his.

"Okay; the more the merrier. Show him in."

A moment later, a very frightened-looking, sandy-haired young man in a cheap, obviously new suit entered the studio and stood, wringing his hands and looking lost. Even at a glance, it was impossible not to notice the huge diagonal scar across the right side of the newcomer's face, and that he was missing the ring finger of his left hand. The General smiled, trying to put the unknown guest at ease as he stood and extended his hand, suddenly struck by a sense of familiarity.

I know this kid, but from where?

It didn't help that the young man looked as if he was going to collapse as he gingerly took the proffered hand.

"I-it's a pleasure t-to meet you again, General Gore, sir."

Frank couldn't help but notice his grip; the man's handshake was not exactly limp, but it was very weak, as if he had an injury.

"I think you have me at a disadvantage, sir. I know you – I'm sure we've met before – but I'm sorry to say I don't remember where."

The young man swallowed hard. "We met in South Carolina, sir, during the war, but I never gave you my name. I'm Joseph Cast…"

Suddenly it came to Frank, and he felt distinctly uncomfortable.

"I remember you now. I'm the one who gave you that scar during a battle in South Carolina."

"Yes sir, that was me."

"I'm sorry, Mr. Cast."

The guest waved away the apology with his mutilated left hand.

"That was war, sir; it wasn't personal. I was just glad you took the time to save my life afterwards. I'd have bled to death if you hadn't bandaged me up."

"I'm glad it worked; they obviously got most of the damage repaired, and you lived. I did what I could, but I have to admit I had my doubts."

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The scar on his face made his grin twisted, but none the less sincere.

"So did I for a while there, sir."

"Look," Frank said, gesturing toward the couch beside his place, "why don't you sit down? And please, enough 'sirs.' The war is over, thank God, so I would take it as an honor if you would just call me Frank."

"Thank you si…Frank," he said as he sat down, "and you can call me Joe."

"Joe then." Nodding at Samantha, Frank asked him, "I take it you've already met my wife?"

"No…well, I saw her at the battle, her and the other ladies. Even as scared and hurting as I was, I remember thinking how pretty they all were."

Samantha blushed slightly and grinned.

"Flatterer." Turning to the audience, she continued, "I hadn't been formally introduced to Mr. Cast until just now either. Colonel Dayton, the head of the Confederate Secret Service, sent word to me a few hours ago that there was someone Frank and I needed to meet, and he wanted to send him over. My husband was in the middle of his duties as Secretary of Defense, and once I was briefed on our guest's story, I had him brought directly to the show. I think everyone in the Confederacy needs to hear your story from your own lips, Joe."

"I agree," Frank added, full of curiosity, "So, what brings you to Dixie?"

"I ran across the border at the DMZ, just southeast of the beltway."

Frank sat up a little straighter.

"Ran across?"

"Yes sir. I was being watched, you know, and as soon as I got the chance, I made a break for the Southern side."

"Why?" Samantha asked, her fine brows furrowing as she leaned forward with increased interest, "Who was watching you?"

"The US Government."

"Why?"

He squirmed a little.

"Do you remember all that stuff they wrote in the papers, about how you two had tortured me?"

"I remember," Frank said, his voice growing a little cooler.

"It was all lies; you know it and I know it…shoot, they know it too. Colonel Dolan told me they wanted a hero, and if I said anything different from what they ordered me to say, if I told the truth, they would make me a traitor instead. He swore they would arrest me for aiding terrorists, and my mother and my fiancée along with me, and…" He paused, looking at Samantha before desperately saying, "Ma'am, I know you know what that means!"

"Yeah," she managed, over the bitter memories that came welling up inside, "I know exactly what it means."

"So I kept my mouth shut, as long as I could, but it kept eating at me, that I was living a lie. And then, after the President hung the Medal of Honor on me, it got worse. Everybody kept going on about what a hero I was, and buying me stuff and everything, and finally I couldn't stand it anymore. I had to tell someone, so I got my mother and my fiancée together and told them what really happened, and that I couldn't keep playing the part anymore, whatever the consequences."

As he blew out his breath, Samantha asked, "How did they take it?"

"Not very well. My fiancée broke off our engagement; it turned out she liked the fame of being with a Medal of Honor winner better than she liked me, I guess. My own mother, who had always taught me to tell the truth, called me a damned un-American traitor for wanting to hurt the country this way and swore she'd disown me if I ever mentioned it again."

"I'm sorry," Frank told him, and meant it.

Cast shrugged. "Not your fault; like I said, that was just war. The thing is, I didn't have anyone left, so I decided to make a trip to Arlington, to visit the graves of my old unit. The government suspected something, so they sent some minders to keep an eye on me while I was touring the border area. My arm's still pretty weak where it was reattached, but I used to run track in high school, and there's nothing wrong with my legs. I made a run for it, slipped away from them, hitched a ride to the border, made it to your side and asked for amnesty.

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Two or three people interviewed me, and then they sent me here." His voice began breaking. "I couldn't keep living like that," he repeated, "This sounds really weird, but you people, my old enemies, are the only ones I've got left to turn to…if you'll have me."

Frank felt a huge lump in his throat as he nodded and reached out his hand once more, and the young man ignored it, embracing him instead. Frank returned the manly hug, swallowing hard and patting Joe Cast's back.

"You'd better believe we'll have you, son. Any honest, honorable man is welcome in Dixie, and we'll find a place for you here. Welcome home."

"Thank you, sir! Thank you!"

Samantha was thankful for waterproof makeup, because she was weeping all over herself, as was half the TV audience.

Southern News Service

Yet another slander against the South has been proven wrong, straight from the horse's mouth. Private Joseph Cast, an enemy soldier wounded in honorable hand-to-hand battle with General Frank Gore himself, was made a cause célèbre by the United States military and media, which alleged that he had been brutally tortured by the General and his wife. And yet he escaped across the lines to the Confederacy at the earliest opportunity, at great risk to himself, and today told the real story to the Gores personally, on live television.

Mr. Cast described how the US military had concocted the lies and the media had spread them, and how he had been forced into silence by threats of imprisonment, torture and death to himself and his family. When he finally revealed what had happened, his own family, who were United States fanatics, disowned him, and he was forced to flee for his life to the Confederacy.

In a tear-jerking confession, he told the Gores on Mrs. Gore's talk show that, "You, my old enemies, are the only ones I've got left to turn to…if you'll have me."

General Gore was willing to have him indeed. He praised Private Cast for his courage and honor, and secured a place for him in the Confederate Naval Department, where he will be sent to Officer Candidate School once the Navy doctors repair the typically slipshod surgery done by the military hospitals on the other side. They predict he will regain nearly full use of his badly damaged right arm and left hand, as well as having his facial scars at least somewhat reduced in appearance.

In the United States, they made Joseph Cast into a hero because of a lie they told; in the Confederate States, this same man, once an enemy, is now a hero because he insisted on telling the truth. I don't know about you, but that makes this writer pretty darned proud to be a Southerner!

Dixie's Conservative Christian Times Editorial

It's been two weeks since the immigrants arrived, and already they seem to be settling themselves nicely. Unlike refugees from the Third World – and those from New Orleans following Hurricane Katrina – these people are fitting in well, wherever they happened to end up. So far, there has not been a single serious crime charged against any of them in any state in the Confederacy. So, just who are these people?

They're called Afrikaners, although, technically, that only applies to the ones of Dutch descent rather than those with British or other ancestry, who make up a large percentage of the total. Still, most of them, whatever their bloodlines, seem flattered by the homespun term General Gore hung on them, that of 'Dixiekaner,' and many have taken to referring to themselves that way.

They are hard working and overwhelmingly Protestant, something that should help allay the fears of

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many Southerners of that religious persuasion, who have expressed concern about the increasing influence of both the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox Churches. Whatever their faith, they are quickly filling the jobs that have been vacant since our loss of population at the end of the Third Revolution; well over half of them are already employed.

No doubt they will change a few things: new words slipping into our Southern lexicon, perhaps, or new recipes in our cookbooks, but almost without question, their greatest impact will be on our military...

Confederate News Service

Secretary of Defense General Frank Gore wasted no time in fulfilling his promise that the able bodied men of the Afrikaner refugees would be added to the Confederate forces. An entire division, nearly half of it made up of Afrikaners, has been added to the ranks of the Confederate Marine Corps, under the command of their rescuer, newly promoted General 'Lucky Charlie' Carnes.

This new division – which will include General Carnes' old 7th Battalion, better known as the 'Pirates' – will also include in its ranks more than 10,000 highly experienced White African professional soldiers. General Gore told reporters that, "For many years, South Africa's primary export has been soldiers of fortune. Combine that with the experience and sterling reputation of the Pirates, and I expect great things out of this division!"

While most of the recent immigrants of military age will reportedly be divided up over the Navy and Marines, there will be so many in this Division that it's already earned the unofficial moniker, the 1st Dixiekaners...

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PART III

THE WARLORD

"Southrons hear your country call you!
Up! Lest worse than death befall you!
To arms! To arms! To arms in Dixie!
Lo! All the beacon fires are lighted!
Let all hearts be now united!
To arms! To arms! To Arms in Dixie!

~ from the Confederate States of America National Anthem

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DAY 1078

CHAPTER 44

Confederate News Service

The Confederate States of America Trade and Travel Agreement with Cuba was signed into law today, causing mass celebrations to break out in both Miami and Havana.

"*This is a great day," the Cuban President told reporters as he stood beside President Jonathon Edge at the joint signing held in Richmond, "We are neighbors, only ninety miles apart, yet separated for over half a century by US imperialism! No more!"*

Following months of intensive negotiations in which the Cuban expatriate community in Florida was heavily involved, the final agreement eliminates most of the barriers between the two countries. Besides allowing the free trade of manufactured goods and agricultural products, the treaty also allows for the free movement of visitors back and forth with only a passport. As part of the deal, cash-strapped Cuba finally conceded on a point that the Confederacy had insisted upon from the beginning; a blanket amnesty for the Cuban expatriates here for counter-revolutionary activity, and the freedom to visit their old homeland at will, and meet the relatives many of them have never seen.

President Jonathon Edge said at the signing, "It is our sincerest hope that both our countries prosper under this treaty, in our economies, our securities, and, most of all, in our friendship toward one another."

Richmond

Confederate Intelligence Service Head Mike Dayton may have technically only held the rank of colonel, but each and every working day, the Acting President and the Secretary of Defense both came to him in *his* office for their intelligence briefing.

"What have you got?" Edge asked without preamble as he walked in ten minutes after Frank arrived, having been held up a little longer answering media questions, politicking, and generally just being seen at the signing of the trade agreement.

In answer, Mike said, "We may have problems." Pressing a button, he caused a map to appear on a 52 inch computer monitor on the wall, and both men's eyes turned toward it. "First, Mexico is continuing the buildup of its troops along our border."

"You've been telling us that. They've been gradually increasing their forces ever since the riots," Frank observed, "trying to rattle us into backing down on our immigration policy. They've got at least Brigade-strength infantry units near every major crossing point now."

"It's more than major crossing points; they're at *every* point now, every dirt road and goat path that leads across our border." He mashed another button, and a string of lights illuminated like a slightly ragged pearl necklace along the line dividing the two countries. "They've begun increasing the number of concentration points, as well as continuing to reinforce the existing ones."

He said nothing else, merely allowing the two to study the map closely.

"Composition?" Edge asked.

"Still mostly infantry, but they've brought up nearly all their armor, most of the latter concentrated on the

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Texas border." Frank digested the information; Mexico had few main battle tanks, but instead relied on fast, light vehicles, mainly French and German-made armored personnel carriers and fighting vehicles of various types, most of them with comparatively small 20mm automatic cannon, although the rubber-tired French Lynx packed a big 90mm smooth bore. "Additionally, they're slowly bringing in more warplanes to the northern half of their country. There have also been an increased number of cargo flights to the border troop concentrations."

"What's the intelligence source?"

"Russian satellites, mainly. Our agents down there have confirmed a good bit of it, along with some long-distance confirmation from spotters with the Arizona, New Mexico, and Texas militia forces from our side of the border, as well as from the CNAN. The Tohono O'Odhom Nation's country is literally on the border, in southern Arizona, and they do a fair bit of black marketing with the Mexicans, so, even though they're in the middle of nowhere, they hear things."

Both the Acting President and Secretary of Defense knew that was true, and not only for the Tohono O'Odhams along the Mexican border, or the Navajos, whose lands north of there adjoined those of two US states. Governments, sanctions and embargoes be damned, there was money to be made, and despite both sides' attempts to stop it, the entire length of both Indian and Confederate borders was a hotbed of smuggling back and forth. Of course, it was many times more intensive and even fairly blatant along the US line, since it was much longer, a bit less secure, and the majority of people living on either side along that boundary had at least a few relatives on the other. For the most part, Richmond turned a blind eye, not only due to the intelligence that came their way because of it, but mainly because there was no sense trying to enforce a law they knew no one was going to obey.

"What about their Navy?"

Mike shrugged. "They don't have much of one, but what they do have seems to be hanging out at the northern end, along the northern Gulf mainly, within a couple of hundred miles of the Texas coast, as well as Sea of Cortez and Baja Pacific."

"I don't like this," Frank said, and Edge nodded.

"I don't either, but I think it's just more saber-rattling. Even as disorganized as we still are, we have an overwhelming ratio of force compared to them. It would be suicidal for Mexico to attack us alone, even assuming they could take us in the first place. Under the current circumstances, they wouldn't have a snowball's chance in Hell; we have clear superiority in infantry, armor, naval and air power."

Frank was not quite so certain, and it was clear in his tone.

"Still…we didn't have a snowball's chance of winning against the United States either. Circumstances can change, especially if someone makes them change."

Edge smiled tightly at his subordinate's paranoia, which, in truth, was not unlike his own.

"Yeah, still. I think you'd better do a little shuffling of our own resources, just to make sure."

"I already intended to do that." He didn't add, "regardless" but it was plain in his tone, making Edge's grin broaden.

"I know; you and I have war-gamed it before."

"There's more," Mike told them, instantly grabbing both their attentions. "I don't know what it is, only that there's something going on in the US. Our agents up there are reporting some increased activity among their military. Nothing major – at least not yet – just some movement and a hell of a lot of chatter, but it worries me because it's not typical and there's no apparent reason for it."

Frank looked at him sharply.

"What kind of chatter?"

Spreading his hands helplessly, he said, "I don't know; just that something's going on. I've never seen it quite like this before."

"Do you think they're connected?"

"I don't know."

"I don't know either," Edge said decisively, "but I'm not a big believer in coincidence, and I'm not willing to take a chance."

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Frank nodded.

"I'm glad you said that, because I'm not either." He paused, running his tongue over his teeth in thought. "I'm going to put a few things in place, just in case. The US is our most powerful potential adversary, and we don't dare pull any more Marine forces from the northern border." He paused, thinking. "I'll move the *Semmes* carrier group to the Gulf and keep them on station there for awhile, and quietly transfer most of our armor and anti-armor forces in Texas, New Mexico and Arizona a little closer to the areas where the Mexican armor seems to be staging, and make sure we've got artillery where we can put fire on them and their most likely routes if necessary."

Edge warned him, "You do that, but be subtle, and under *no* circumstances are you to escalate the situation, unless we have an actual border incursion. The odds are against an incident happening right now, and we can't afford to provoke one ourselves."

"Not to worry; I'll keep them back, but within easy reach. I'll get with the governors of all three of those states, and ask them to concentrate more of their militia forces near the border; that way, we should be able to blunt any attack, and discourage the Mexicans from attempting any incursions that could set things off."

"But Eustace, this could be a serious situation!"

Texas' Provisional Congressman Eustace Wright could see he wasn't making himself clear to Dewey King, the Lone Star State's provisionally appointed Governor, who had just called him from Austin.

"It *is* a serious situation; the Central Government is trying to put us under an unfunded mandate. This is a question of states' rights."

Governor King, as was his habit when frustrated, furiously scratched at his bald head while his handlebar mustache bristled.

"This isn't a question of states' rights; this is a question of half the damned Mexican Army right on our state's border, and of militia General Gaul, who refuses to recognize my lawful authority as Governor, and goes running to you like a dog sniffing your ass before he'll obey his lawful orders."

"He should come running to me, as you put it, anytime those orders conflict with states' rights."

"What the hell has states' rights got to do with it?" King finally lost his temper and exploded, "The Secretary of Defense asked us – *asked us* – to assist the Marines in stepping up border security and reconnaissance on *our own border!* We're the ones in danger here!"

"There is no danger!" Wright thundered back, "I've spoken to several other Congressmen, and they've assured me that this is all a plot by Edge and the rest to see how far they can push us into accepting their centralized control!"

"Horse shit! It's that son of a bitch Tarbox who put you up to this stupidity, isn't it?"

"Damn you, don't you call me stupid!"

"I'll call you any damned thing you act like!"

"I can have you removed!"

"Oh yeah? You and what army?"

"Me and General Gaul's militia," Wright told him, the satisfaction plain in his voice, "As you said, he's loyal to the state, meaning me."

King's voice became cold and dangerous. The Governor was a former Marine with Force Recon, with three tours of combat duty in the Middle East under his web belt; he had never taken shit from anybody, and he was damned if he was going to start now.

"He might be, but you'd better remember not every man under him is."

"Are you threatening me?" The question was rhetorical; from the tone, it was very clear that's exactly what Governor King was doing.

"Take it however you want it."

"If that's the way you want to play it, but remember this; I've given Gaul an order, and no extra money and resources of ours are going to be wasted on the Central Government's wild goose chase, regardless of what you want!" The seething Congressman took a deep breath and added, "I'm not going to forget this."

"Don't forget something else," Governor King responded icily, realistically knowing he wasn't strong

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enough to override the man's power just yet, "One of these days, Tarbox is going to turn a sharp corner, real sudden and unexpected-like, and he's going to snap your nose right off your face."

There was a click and Congressman Wright found himself listening to dead air and plotting as to just how he could replace Dewey King without causing a major uproar in his state.

Camp Atterbury Joint Maneuver Training Center, Indiana

US Colonel Hiram Parsons found his loyalties torn for the first time in his life. He had always been loyal to the United States, a regular Midwestern blue-eyed all-American boy…until he had been forced to look at the other side.

When the Confederates had captured him in South Carolina, he had no idea what to expect, other than that it wouldn't be good. It wasn't like he had surrendered; instead, he had been alone for only a moment in the wrong place at the wrong time, and someone had hit him over the head with a homemade blackjack made with a half-inch pipe nipple stuffed into the end of a foot-long piece of rubber hose. He awoke bound and gagged, and a guest of the Confederate Army Provisional.

That was when it got weird. They had interrogated him repeatedly and intensively, but had never tortured him. No one had done any violence to him, or even threatened to, and he was fed and generally well cared-for, considering the guerrillas' circumstances. More importantly, once they made certain he hadn't committed or ordered any torture, murder, rape, or looting, he had been treated with a level of respect he never expected, a level that he found surprising, all things considered. And that surprise had turned to complete and full-blown shock when he had been asked to witness the now-famous, or infamous, trial, depending on which side you were on, and was actually allowed to speak on behalf of the interests of the two dead female soldiers, and on behalf of the United States.

He supposed he should have known that would bring his career to a screeching halt once he was released, but for some reason he hadn't. He was too popular with the US general public as a result of the Internet video of his testimony to actually remove or imprison, but it was made very clear to him that the top brass – meaning the Administration's ass-kissers – that he was considered a terrorist dupe, and if he wanted advancement, he'd be better off retiring to the private sector, the sooner the better. Officers he'd considered friends for years now shied away from him or snubbed him outright for the sake of their own careers, because the word had been put out that he was tainted goods. Then they had stuck him out at Camp Atterbury in his native state of Indiana, in a purely administrative position that was, essentially, exile in the military world. He was treated better as a POW, and he knew that despite having fought against them, the Confederates would accept him, probably at his current rank, if…

If…always that big if!

When he really thought about it, what did he have to stay in the US for? His wife had left him for a college professor – *A leftist, bald, hook-nosed Jewish college professor with a damned ponytail, for God's sake!* – while he was a prisoner, and, due to his frequent long deployments, his two grown kids had been strangers to him for as long as he could remember. What was holding him back, besides simple inertia?

He mentally shrugged. He was forty-five, and knew, if he ever intended to start over, it would have to be soon…and, considering what he had just heard, if he wanted to start over in the South, it would have to be real soon, or there wouldn't be a South left to start over in.

Despite being a pariah, Colonel Parsons still heard things, particularly since part of his job was that of a glorified messenger boy, shuttling from point to point in the US Army's bailiwick. Over the past few weeks, he had picked up enough scuttlebutt to get at least a basic understanding of some of what was going on, and it scared the hell out of him. If what "his" side was up to worked, it would go down in history as one of the most despicable acts ever committed by any government, anytime, anywhere…*if* it worked. But he knew it wouldn't; there was too much left to chance, so the odds were against it. Failure meant a nuclear exchange where untold thousands or maybe even millions on both sides would die, and ultimately, it would mean the fall of both countries.

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That was what finally settled the issue for him; no matter that many would consider it treason, he could not bring himself to allow that to happen, as long as he had the means to prevent it.

Crossing over would be a simple matter; just take a few days leave, drive down to New Albany, buy a cheap canoe at the local mega-mart, and paddle across the Ohio to Louisville, Kentucky; only a few hundred yards of water was standing between him and a whole new life, and, just maybe, saving two countries. Maybe even the world; who knew? There was no question that, with the knowledge he possessed, the Confederates would take him in. There was only one thing he couldn't give them.

I know at least some of what's coming, but not when.

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DAY 1092

CHAPTER 45

Phone conversation

"*Have you got all your people in place?*"
"*Yes sir; everyone at this end has checked in and is ready to roll.*"
"*Good. Are you in the building now?*"
"*Yes.*"
"*Stay there; that's exactly where I need you. However, you might want to move to a safe place, such as an interior room or one on the far side.*"
"*You…you think it will reach here?*"
"*Probably somewhat, but you'll be safe if you do what I tell you. Besides, I can't risk you; after all, somebody will have to be left to ask for US help, and to act as head of our puppet government afterward. That should provide some very lucrative opportunities for you, in more ways than one.*"
"*I'm counting on that.*"

Columbia

Colonel Mike Dayton had returned to Columbia for the Independence Day Celebration, in a small part out of duty, but mainly because Cynthia was going to be there. He had intended to actually go to the event in front of the Capitol itself, but he hated crowds – "I'm stuck in this damned chair, which means I'm eye-to-ass with everyone else!" he had often said – so he didn't mind that intelligence matters were keeping him away. Since he did most of his work in cyberspace, operating out of the main computer room in the Waddell-Franklin Confederate Building was little different than working out of his regular office in Richmond, other than the hardware not being arranged to his exact personal specifications. Either place, though, there were things still bothering him.

The Mexican buildup along the border had continued, for one thing, and the US activity was increasing for another, neither for any reason he could fathom, based on the information he had available. That worried him; Mike was a knowledge junkie, and he didn't like not knowing things.

Tapping a finger impatiently, he opened a message from the Kentucky Militia Commander marked high priority with the word "IMPORTANT!" in the subject line, he didn't expect too much; it seemed like everyone considered their message to be vitally important, no matter what the subject. It looked like this one would be the same; quickly reading over it, he saw that Colonel Hiram Parsons had defected to their side.

I remember him! I'll have to pass this on to Sammie; she can get quite a propaganda coup out of this one.

Almost anyone else would have skipped the rest of the message and simply forwarded it on, but almost anyone else was not Mike. He continued reading, and by the time he finished, his mouth was hanging open and he was gaping like a fish. Seemingly unconnected events abruptly began clicking into place, and suddenly he was more frightened than he had ever been in his life.

Captain Hector Gonzalez was a patient man; not only had his commando training taught him that, but it was

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bred into him through countless generations of peon ancestors since the time of the Aztecs. He simply sat there in his stolen South Carolina Militia uniform behind the closed doors of the suburban garage in the passenger seat of the stolen Humvee, the sole of one boot propped against the dash, waiting and thinking.

He and his six-man squad had been in this house for months now, never once going outside; after they had laid the sewer lines, there was no need to. Instead they exercised, played cards, watched television, and talked of the Reconquista, of the return of Aztlan, and of the glories of a rising Mexico.

Tonight was the night it would begin, and the world would never be the same.

Patient or not, his narrow, black eyes couldn't help but stray toward the remote detonator sitting on his dashboard. It was his short, blunt finger that would have the honor of entering the code that would make it happen.

Seated at his personal laptop on the kitchen table of their temporarily rented suburban house, Frank had fully convinced himself that theirs was not a government; it was a damned insane asylum, and the inmates were running it. Everybody, especially the Provisional Congress and those organizations, churches, and other interest groups who wanted something from it, fought and bitched constantly, and then, for variety, they bitched and fought. Despite Tarbox's filibuster-proof coalition being largely broken along with his jaw, what with his almost universally bottomed-out public opinion causing those he was not actually blackmailing to distance themselves, it seemed to mean little in actual practice. Having a thousand things that urgently needed doing, they had accomplished exactly zilch besides irritating one another, not to mention the Southern people. It was becoming increasingly obvious that winning the war had been the easy part.

He got his umpteenth cup of black coffee as far as his nose before grimacing and putting it back down. He knew he already had enough caffeine in his system to keep a herd of wild elephants awake, and there was no sense in adding to it. Interlacing his fingers, he put his hands over his head and leaned far back as he stretched, his over-tight muscles and tendons popping audibly as his rolled up cuffs tightened around his muscular forearms.

What a way to run a railroad!

Of course, a railroad wasn't what he was running; as Secretary of Defense for the ruling Provisional Congress, what he was running was nothing less than the entire Naval Department military forces of the South. As far as he was concerned, 'running' was too strong a word. It was more of a case of being chief of the Humpty Dumpty reassembly department, and six months into it, he still had no idea where the bulk of the missing pieces were going to come from.

Personnel-wise, it was complicated enough. The treaty called for anyone serving in the US Armed Forces and not accused of war crimes against one side or the other to choose which he would align with. Both sides had presumed that the choices would be largely geographically based, and for the most part they were. Of course, the US loudly touted more than a few hundred thousand 'loyal Red State Southerners' – most of them actually Negroes and Hispanics, either no longer welcome or no longer wanting to live in a South that, with the exception of the autonomous and entirely Indian CNAN, was now well over 85% White and getting Whiter by the day – who went North, but no one knew quite what to make of an only slightly smaller number of White Northern soldiers, sailors, airmen, and marines who, along with most of the European immigrants serving, seemed to come forward out of nowhere to swear loyalty to the Confederacy, There was no doubt that some of them were spies (Confederate Intelligence Service Chief Mike Dayton had sent several agents of his own to the US in that very same fashion.), but most seemed to sincerely want a new chance in the new country.

This situation caused a split (*another* split, Frank amended, alongside what seemed to be at least a million others) in the Congress. Despite their obvious need for more men, Jonathon Edge wanted nothing to do with them, seeing them as a possible security risk and/or a source of further cultural pollution. The Secretary of Defense found an unexpected ally in Vice President Andrew MacFie, Edge's old political nemesis. Dr. MacFie argued the historical precedent that, during the first War for Southern Independence, quite a few Yankees threw in their lots with the South for various reasons, and were fully accepted, sometimes even as officers. Even though he was eventually victorious, it still rankled Frank to no end that the argument of precedent carried greater weight amongst most of the Congress than his purely practical one that they simply

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didn't have enough trained men to be able to turn many people away.

"Stupid bastards!" Sam Wirtz commiserated with him that evening over a frosty mug of beer as they celebrated his small victory at the Jefferson, "They're more interested in what color socks Robert E. Lee wore to church on Sundays than in the things we need right now!"

Since the only thing the Congress could agree on regarding the military was that the Confederate land forces should be made up of the various state militias, with the Central Government controlling only the Naval Department, Frank got tired of waiting, said to hell with them all, as had increasingly become his habit, and began making it to fit his own vision. No one on the Congress complained, and vast majority were so caught up in their own political wranglings that they never even noticed.

The various state militias were the army; many of the history-savvy Confederates shared with the original founding fathers an extreme distrust of a standing army under the control of the Central Government. The Congress got the individual states to agree to place every able-bodied male from seventeen (as young as fifteen in a couple of states) to forty-five years old into their militia, and to agree on common ammunition standards to simplify supply issues during any conflict that they might be called up for, but otherwise they were totally state-run and state-controlled, meaning their resulting capabilities ranged from the very elite to the totally FUBAR'ed, depending on the quality of their personnel, training budgets, and leadership, the latter being determined more often by political alliances than abilities and experience. Still, since the only time they would fall under his control was during an invasion, Frank was forced to view them as a peripheral issue, and it wasn't like he had time to spare for much of that, considering what else was on his plate.

Besides the obvious ships, submarines, and patrol boats, the Navy also meant Naval Air, which was technically *the* Confederate Air Force. Although no one called it that, the fact remained that few of the states really wanted or were able to bear the costs of acquisition and upkeep of modern fighters, bombers and attack helicopters, and they were glad to let the beleaguered Department of Defense handle that end of things.

The Navy also included the Confederate States Marine Corps, expected to do the type of fighting Frank had firsthand experience in himself, so, while he left much of the organization of the ships and planes to his subordinates who were experts in those fields, the Marines became his pet project.

Before anyone began any serious rumbling about the large number of Marines, and the dangers of them being a de facto standing army under central control, Frank cut them off at the pass. Every serviceman, without exception, enlisted in the Navy and went through Naval Basic Training. Then those interested in becoming Marines – and who passed the grueling physical and psychological tests to qualify – went on to Boot Camp, then to their CST: Combat Specialty Training. There were no non-combat specialties in the Confederate Marines; the Navy handled all of that, from medics to communications to logistics to intelligence to supply. Instead, in order to get the biggest bang for their buck, every Marine was trained to do one thing, and one thing only: fight like a son of a bitch and defeat the enemy as quickly and efficiently as possible, whoever or where ever he happened to be. Whatever their combat specialty, the Marines were an elite force.

Developing a standard training program was a bear, at least as hard as the training itself. Since no one in Congress could seem to make up their minds, he relied heavily on his own experienced personnel, not only higher-ups like Admiral Hardy and General Lannigan, but actively incorporated veterans all the way down to career NCOs, as well as their now almost-ubiquitous Spetsnaz advisors and former White African mercenaries in designing the program. There was the traditional Marine Corps emphasis on individual marksmanship and rapid deployment ability, not to mention unflinching courage and raw aggression. Frank also insisted on extreme mobility, which meant that, unless he was on a special assignment requiring it, the average Marine infantryman loaded himself down with little more than his weapons and ammunition, and a pocket full of MREs, and could quickly cover distances considered impossible in most armies. With the constant input of the officers, he instituted a multipurpose catchall special operations force, the MSSF – Marine Special Service Force, or 'Misfits' as they generally referred to themselves. Its physical and mental requirements were so tough as to exclude over 75% of otherwise highly qualified Marines even from entry into the program. A multi-skilled unit with several areas of specializations, it had a number of specifically dedicated units that, between them, fulfilled the combined roles of the SEALs, Special Forces, Rangers, Pathfinders, and Recon in the US military. MSSF posts were eagerly sought after by native Southerner and

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immigrant alike because of their status as a badge of the highest honor, and the competition for the available slots was sometimes almost as fierce as the brutal training.

That training was continuous and constant, and in a form that improved their performance while boosting overall Naval security. Part of that job was to probe Confederate Government and military installations, planning and staging mock attacks at random intervals against facilities whose commanding officers were equally determined to stop any breach of the site's integrity. A lot was at stake, not only militarily but personally; any unit successfully launching or defending against the mock attacks was in line for extra leave and payroll bonuses for its members, and, with enough successes, accelerated promotions, while the losing side was in for intensive investigation, including a lot of debriefing, in order to determine what went wrong and how to prevent the situation from repeating. Those consistently on the losing end quickly found their careers at a dead end.

Frank instituted some further, rather novel requirements covering every member of the Naval Department. To begin with, he insisted that all promotions be awarded as a result of demonstrated ability, not time in grade, political connections, or the willingness to kiss the correct ass in the prescribed military manner. In fact, he put in place a handpicked investigative military police unit under direct command of the Secretary of Defense – himself – to review all promotions and anything else that smacked of favoritism over ability, shattering the military 'old boys' club' before it had a chance to entrench itself.

Determined to continually increase the competence of the military, Frank instituted the CER: the Continuing Education Regulation, requiring that all Navy and Marine personnel continue their education throughout their active duty military careers. There were no restrictions on subjects, and free tuition and distance learning was made available, but each enlisted man was required to successfully complete two hours of college credit each year, and each officer had to complete four, unless they had spent more than thirty days in a combat zone during that time. There was a lot of bitching about the requirement at first, but it was half-hearted at best, because it was not only for the Navy's good, but for the men's own good, and most of them recognized that. By the time they left the service, they would be very employable.

Finally, taking a lesson from the knightly Code of Chivalry, Frank insisted that the members of the Confederate Naval Department, both Sailors and Marines, know how to act like Southern gentlemen. He was not unrealistic about it; they could and did drink and fight and cuss and beat the hell out of each other in fights behind the barracks and at the NCO clubs – boys will be boys, after all – but it could easily be worth their career to misbehave in public by "conduct unbecoming." Frank was disgusted by the actions of the US occupation troops that had infested Dixie only months before, and was fully aware of the high value most Southerners placed on good manners. Although he considered those things to be vital issues, an even greater practical concern was the matter of public trust, and its value in keeping the public solidly behind the military. If sailors and marines – even enlisted men – behaved even better than the general public, the said public would begin to see them as something to emulate, not merely something to tolerate: an attitude that would be an invaluable asset, both in recruiting and in the inevitable budget battles in the Congress.

Accordingly, each recruit from basic training onward attended compulsory quarterly classes on honorable and polite conduct, many of which were taught be elderly female civilian volunteers, who remembered very well how gentlemen were supposed to behave, occasionally leading to the hilarious sight of a burley, particularly recalcitrant Sailor or Marine having his knuckles rapped by someone's great-grandmother. Again, there was the inevitable griping about having to learn the social graces, but most of them realized, if nothing else, it made them much more successful with the ladies, so much so that many girls and their match-making mothers actively pursued them, seeking a man in uniform who knew how treat them, and would not embarrass them. It also had the unintended but positive side effect of lowering the already fractional crime rate even further. Part of their oath was "to defend the weak among our people, those not able to defend themselves," and the naturally testosterone-filled servicemen saw it as their duty, in uniform or out, to discourage attacks on women, children or other innocents whenever they were present. In one celebrated case in Myrtle Beach, a pair of partying Marines came upon a gang rape in progress, and 'discouraged' the attack so enthusiastically that none of the four attackers survived to face trial. Following a few similar, if not quite so spectacular incidents, violent criminals tended to think twice.

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Of course, the Marines in particular trained overseas quite a bit as well, through officer and non-com exchange programs with Japan, Russia, and Serbia. In the case of Russia, hundreds of them earned their combat badges in Chechnya, and in a handful of cases, earned Russian medals as well.

In the end, the training, no matter how improvised and unorthodox, was a success. Soon hundreds of thousands of Confederate Marines were trained and ready to be equipped.

Which brought him to headache number two.

The treaty had called for the US leaving behind whatever they had on the Southern side of the border. For the most part they had complied, but, due to the Gordian knot of military paperwork, no one, on *either* side, actually knew how much of what was where. Almost every day, big stuff like planes, tanks, and in one case, even a missile frigate undergoing refitting that they didn't know they had, was discovered, while other assets they were certain they had were found to either be on the other side of the line or still somewhere in limbo.

The smaller things like uniforms, rifles, and meal trays didn't even bear thinking about. Personnel on every base were working twelve to fourteen hours a day just taking inventory, and others were working just as hard to correlate the information, and there was still no end in sight. The fact that the other side was almost certainly going through the same process was cold comfort.

If that all wasn't enough, Frank was also left to oversee the development and acquisition of standardized weapons systems that they could afford to buy or build and deploy, which was no small order. On the advice of Hardy and Lannigan, he kept it as simple as he could while getting the most bang for the buck.

For the most part, the Congress, already loaded down with endless battles over domestic issues, semantics, and political minutia, didn't want to hear about any of it. With the exception of Edge, Sam, Jack Boggess, TJ Ashby, and a few others who could see beyond the moment, as far as they were concerned the war was over. Only few of them knew that, in all likelihood, it had only just begun.

"It's about that time, Frank."

Glad for an excuse to do so, he logged off his computer, closed it, and rubbed his eyes before looking up at Billy who had wandered into the kitchen.

The big man shook his dark blonde hair, cut barely short enough for decorum, and made his thick, but short and neatly-trimmed beard waggle.

"Never done, is it?"

"It doesn't seem like it. Sometimes I wonder if it's ever even started."

The doorbell interrupted him, and Billy turned away to get it.

"Well, get up and wash your face and get yourself straightened out," Billy said over his shoulder, "Put some eye drops in too, or they'll accuse me of takin' you outside and burnin' one with you."

Frank took the advice and headed for the bathroom. Looking in the mirror, it was obvious: he looked like hell. There were more lines and more gray every day. He wasn't even thirty-five yet, and the fashionably short dark beard that partly hid the scars on his face was already turning salt and pepper.

At least I'm not as old as I feel; if that was the case, I'd be dead by now!

In the house behind him, he heard Billy answering the door, followed by a trio of familiar voices. Wiping his face, he stepped out of the bathroom to find Sam Wirtz, his Goddaughter Donna, and her husband and Billy's best friend, Tommy Richardson.

Frank was glad the two had finally married. They were the only ones capable of understanding one another's pain, but for a while it had looked like their relationship might break up after their rescue from the Federal torturers. They still bore the marks even more obviously in their eyes than in their bodies, but the pain was fading with time, and with their love for each other.

Ignoring the two men for the moment, Frank first took Donna in his arms and hugged her tightly to him, leaning over her swollen belly. He felt her child shifting inside as if in protest of even the slight pressure he had put against her.

"How're you doing?"

"Better," she said bravely, the same stock answer she always gave. "Better."

"Good." He let go of her and embraced her husband.

"It's been too long, Tommy."

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"Too damned long, bro," the smaller man responded as the two affectionately pounded each other's backs, "Way too long!"

The same age, each saw more than their mutual years reflected back from the other. Like Frank, Tommy's dark beard hid most of his own scars. After having his head shaved as a prisoner, Tommy had kept his hair short, about the same length as Frank's. Truth be told, except for the size difference, they looked a lot alike.

Frank turned to Sam Wirtz, whom he saw almost daily, and was still glad to set eyes on again.

"Thanks for bringing them, Sam."

"I couldn't keep 'em away. Donna thought you might need a baby sitter for Linda while you all went to the big shindig tonight."

Frank shook his head.

"We're not going."

The older man blinked.

"Not going? But…this is the anniversary of Columbia, where you two started the war."

"I know, but I'm buried in work and Sammie is…having a pretty tough time with her second pregnancy. We just got back from the hospital this afternoon, and the last thing she needs right now is to be jostled around in a big crowd while she's stuck in an uncomfortable chair listening to those windbags in the Congress drone on and on about nothing for two or three hours – present company excepted, of course."

Sam grabbed Frank's upper arm, something that would have been an extremely dangerous act for nearly anyone else. Samantha had married Frank wearing the wedding dress that had belong to the late Mrs. Wirtz, and Sam had stood in for her father, giving her away. He had a special bond with her, and as far as he was concerned, she was family.

"Is she all right?"

"Yeah, so far. The doctors say she's unlikely to carry these twins quite to full term, though, and for her sake and theirs, we want her to carry them as far as she can, and I damned sure want to make sure she has them at a hospital, not in the middle of the street. When Sammie's in this kind of shape, my place is with her, not out there putting on a dog and pony show for the press. Please make my apologies, and if that's not good enough, tell anyone who complains I said they can go to Hell." He smiled. "You can quote me on that."

Sam laughed out loud at his normally easy-going friend's outbreak of irascibility. The General's head butting with the Congress was already legendary. Even though he thought Frank was making a mistake by not coming, he fully understood the Secretary of Defense and admired his spirit. Along with Frank, Sam was the only one without political aspirations of his own as far as the new Confederate Government was concerned; neither of them wanted anything more than to get the country on its feet by the time of the election a few months away. After that, they both intended to retire to civilian life and let someone else deal with it.

Being a simple farmer was looking so good.

"Did someone mention my name?"

They turned as one at the sound of the honeyed feminine voice.

Samantha stood in the doorway, her blonde hair pulled back in a ponytail and her pajamas and robe stretched tight over her distended belly with one hand below the bulge to steady and support it. Carrying a pair of what her obstetrician assured her were twin boys inside made her feel as big as a house. Despite how she felt and the obvious changes in her body, she was still breathtakingly beautiful.

Hovering beside her protectively was her own personal assistant/bodyguard, Cynthia Dover. As blond as Samantha but several inches shorter, Cynthia was not even twenty, but the petite, wiry girl exuded as much danger in her own way as did the three times larger and much more experienced Billy. She had been with the couple since early in the war, just over two years. After she had been gang-raped and infected with HIV, it had been the Confederate Army Provisional that had provided the drugs that kept her alive, and she had joined up and never looked back. Once peace finally broke out, she, along with Billy, had stayed on with the Gores as their own secret service protection. She took her duties seriously and trained constantly until she was as deadly as any woman alive. Due to her sex she was more effective than a man in many ways, because she could unobtrusively go anywhere Samantha could without causing undue disruption. She would also die for her or kill for her with absolutely no hesitation whatsoever. Like Billy, like Sam and Donna and Tommy, she

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was family in every way but blood.

At the moment she looked anything but deadly as she followed Samantha, ready to catch her if she should stumble.

Sam frowned.

"Where's Linda?"

In answer to his inquiry, there was a squeal of delight, and Thumper came bounding down the hallway with the little girl on his back. Both her chubby legs were clamped around the big dog's midsection, and rolls of loose skin were determinedly clenched in her hands.

Tommy laughed and Sam bellowed, "What in the hell?!" when Thumper slid to a stop at his feet and the laughing Linda flew off and went rolling across the carpet until she was brought up against his shins.

"Meet Linda's new favorite sport," Frank told him, shaking his head with a laugh, "and Thumper encourages her. He'll actually take his head and scoot her around until she climbs on. They both love it."

"Unka Sam! Unka Sam!" she yelled, and he scooped her up.

"What's that mean old dog doing to my baby girl, huh?"

"Thumpa fun! Bulldoggie!" She declared, then squealed when the object of the conversation reached up and slurped his broad pink tongue across the bottom of her bare foot. "No ticka, Thumpa! No ticka!"

Samantha smiled while she watched.

"I'm so glad you let him stay with us, Sam; those two are inseparable."

"Huh! It was pretty obvious where he wanted to be." Shooting the giant bulldog a mock glare, he muttered, "Turncoat!" eliciting a broad, toothy grin and a lick on the arm.

"*Team 1"*
"*Go ahead."*
"*Your target has not arrived yet. Please confirm at your location."*
"*He has visitors – three – unable to ascertain identities."*
"*Stand by on station and await instructions."*
"*Confirmed."*

"I love what you've done with your hair," Samantha told Donna as they sat together with Cynthia on the couch, to all appearances just an ordinary trio of women friends enjoying each other's company. Every one of them devoutly wished that was the case, but the mental scars carried by all three after being brutalized made each of them weigh every word before they said it, lest it open an old injury on one of the others – or on themselves. Sometimes they found their gatherings became a masochistic exercise in rubbing raw wounds together.

Donna ran her fingers through her long locks, dyed blond instead of their natural chestnut brown, and smiled.

"I just thought I wanted to try something different for a change, and I always liked your shade. Tommy sure seems to like it; he teases me it's like having another woman."

"Tact isn't exactly a male specialty, is it?" Cynthia observed dryly, making all three of them giggle, and taking years off their ages. It didn't help when Billy, on the other side of the room, picked that time to loudly make the observation that Donna and Tommy had come to look just like Sammie and Frank – "only in miniature!" referring to the couple's smaller statures. Cynthia chuckled at a point proven and continued. "So, how's married life?"

Donna dropped her head and smiled shyly. "It's good. I love him, but it's more than that. He's the only one who can really understand.

"So how about you? Have you got any prospects?" Suddenly she realized she had just opened her mouth and inserted her foot as she had always been prone to doing. Even though the petite bodyguard did fine on the HIV medication, it was still not a cure; she was still a carrier. "Oh, I'm sorry!"

Cynthia smiled. "Don't be sorry; as a matter of fact, I *do* have one."

Both the other women leaned forward, their eyes widening in surprise, particularly Samantha. Cynthia was

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with her almost constantly, but she hadn't noticed anything out of the ordinary. They lived in the same place, so she knew it couldn't be Billy, and whoever it was, they were either HIV positive themselves or cared enough about her to be willing to take a chance.

"Who?"

The younger girl simply smiled knowingly, cocked her head noncommittally, and said nothing. She wasn't ready just yet.

Across the room, it was really not all that much different; the four men sat comparing notes as well.

"Look, Tommy," Frank said, "if there is anything I can do to help you two, anything at all you need, you just let me know, all right?"

"That goes double for me, bro," Billy's loud voice boomed out, "You know that."

"And me," the Palmetto Congressman told him.

"I know that, and so does Donna. It's just...well, what the hell can you do or say? You all have been through it yourselves, pretty much, so you know what I'm talking about."

They nodded understandingly, even though they all recognized the lie. All of them had gone through hell, but what Tommy and Donna had suffered was much, much worse than that.

"Well," Frank told him, extending an envelope, "I know something I can do. Here; these are our tickets to that big soirée tonight; you can take our front row seats, and if you can see through all the horse manure flowing from the speaker's podium, you'll have a perfect view of the fireworks. They're supposed to be the biggest ever seen. After that, you can fill in for us at the dance and dinner they're having afterwards, using my reservations."

Tommy's eyes widened. "Frank, we can't take your and Sammie's fun!"

"I told you, partner; we're not going, so if you don't, the seats will be empty. Besides, you two need to get out a little bit." He didn't add that he was concerned for their psychological health; the couple almost seemed like hermits. Despite the pensions awarded them by the Confederate Provisional Government, neither of them were well set for money, and they could never afford decent tickets to something like this.

"I...I don't know what to say."

"Say, 'thanks' and then get the hell out of here, or you're going to be late."

Tommy said exactly that, and Donna was thrilled at the news when Frank announced it.

"Now just a minute," Sam grumbled, "what about Linda? Are you going to make that little girl miss these fireworks?"

"We'd be happy to take her," Donna offered, but Samantha shook her head.

"We want you to enjoy the evening, not baby-sit."

"It's no problem."

"You're right, it's no problem," Sam told them, "because they ain't going to take her; I am."

"You?" Frank asked with a chuckle.

"Yes, me. It's been too long since her Uncle Sam got to spoil her."

Samantha laughed out loud at that and muttered, "only every time he sees her," out of the corner of her mouth, setting the other women to giggling again.

"But for a whole evening? She's not completely 'housebroken' yet."

"Damn it, do you think I don't know how to change a diaper?" He looked pointedly at Donna. "I must have changed a thousand of them on you and your sister, and I don't reckon I've forgotten how it's done." Turning from Frank, he looked pleadingly at Samantha. "Please?"

Throwing up her hands in defeat, she said, "Fine, Sam, but if you go feeding her chocolate again, she stays with *you* until it wears off!"

"Ah, you don't want her to have any fun! Come here, baby; you come to Uncle Sam." Not much over two, Linda already knew which side her bread was buttered on – as well as which pocket the candy was most likely to come from – and broke away from pestering the long-suffering Thumper again, and into a toddling run across the floor to his outstretched arms, crying, "Unka Sam! Unka Sam!"

He swept her up and tossed her into the air, making her squeal before catching her again.

"Does Linda want to go for ice cream and cotton candy, and see some fireworks go *boom*?"

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Her mouth split in a drooling smile and she planted a big, slobbery kiss right on his lips.

"Unka Sam! Unka Sam! *Boom*!"

"*This is Team 1. Three individuals just left carrying a child; unable to say for certain if it is the visitors or the subjects. It looks like them, but I can't make a positive ID.*"

"*Stand by and await instructions.*"

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CHAPTER 46

Vika tapped Edge on the shoulder to get his attention above the noise of the crowd.

"I need to go to the ladies room."

He momentarily squeezed her hand and nodded absently, never breaking his conversation with the Russian ambassador: an informal but very serious discussion of a proposed trade agreement that would open a series of Russian-owned plants to manufacture military hardware in the CSA for both domestic and international sale.

She smiled; she was used to his ways, and didn't take it personally; besides his responsibilities were so great, she sometimes wondered how he made enough time to be with her at all. Rising to her feet, she began threading her way through the crowd and its accompanying sea of folding chairs in the reserved VIP section around the South Carolina Capital steps, heading for the porta-johns on the corner of Main and Gervais Streets. It was barely-ordered confusion; the few people like her, the victims of full bladders or too much sweet and greasy food from the carnival-style street vendors at the fringes of the crowd, were like salmon swimming against the tide of more and more people still coming in. Most of the latecomers were too intent on finding their assigned seats to pay her much mind, although a few recognized her, and greeted her with a mixture of warm smiles and cold nods, depending on what they thought the President, or of him having a Russian fiancée. With the latter, it was usually simply a case of her not being Southern, but many of them were unable to let go of the Cold War mentality and the propaganda fed into their heads prior to independence, and recognize the fact that, just because their fathers and grandfathers had fought against someone under the banner of the United States, it didn't automatically make that someone a bad guy, and it certainly didn't make them the enemy of their new country, the CSA. Despite understanding on an intellectual level the psychological mechanics of how some people would be unable to get past that, in her heart, it was completely beyond her how any patriot could continue to both resent and despise the country that had done more than any other to assist them in securing their freedom.

Suddenly she heard her name, and looked up to see Tommy and Donna directly in front of her.

"Vika!" Donna exclaimed as she briefly hugged her, and Tommy laughed and said, loud enough to be heard over the roar of the crowd, "You're going the wrong way; the party's over there," pointing back in the direction she had come from.

"But the lady's room is over there somewhere," she told him, gesturing in the opposite direction with a sincere smile that made the corners of her eyes crinkle.

"Do you need me to help you find it?" Donna asked, and the Russian shook her head, appreciating the girl's gesture.

"Thanks, but I'll manage. Go have a good time."

"That's a first for me," Tommy threw in, "I thought you ladies always traveled in packs when you went to the John."

"Oh, go on!" Donna told him, gently and playfully shoving him in the direction she wanted him to go. Looking back over her shoulder at Vika, she laughed and said, "Men! You can't take 'em anywhere!"

Vika giggled and took a single step, promptly bumping into Sam, who was carrying little Linda.

"Excuse me, ma'am," he said with a chuckle. "I think you're going the wrong way."

"So I've been told. Hello, Sam; Hello, Linda."

She stuck out her hands with a smile and Linda promptly responded in kind, calling her Aunt Vika, which came out as a garbled "Avika," which Edge's fiancée thought was so cute. She took the little girl for a moment; like most Russians, she had an inborn cultural affinity and affection for children, and, with the instinct inborn in the young, Linda had learned early-on that this was another one she could count on to spoil her at every opportunity.

"So, where are you off to, if you don't mind me asking?"

"I'm looking for, how do you say it, the little girl's room."

Sam smiled; although he would never let on that he noticed, of course, this beautiful woman was anything

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but a little girl.

"Then you'd better let me take her back. Come on, Linda; we'll see Aunt Vika in a few minutes. Let's go get some ice cream."

"Ice cream!" she squealed, immediately ready to go back to him.

Vika handed her over somewhat gratefully, not that she minded holding the child, but because the pressure on her bladder was getting painfully noticeable.

"I'll see you in a few minutes," she said in parting, and then moved off, picking up her pace.

The spotter finally saw the couple move into the chairs allotted to Frank and Samantha Gore. He couldn't get a clear view of them, even with his binoculars, but, between the people moving back and forth, he confirmed the short beard on the man, and the blond head of hair and a case of advanced pregnancy on the woman. A moment later, through a break in the crowd, he spotted South Carolina's Congressman, Samuel Wirtz, carrying the child over to sit down beside them. The watching man was already moving, heading away from the area as he keyed the microphone, and was answered instantly.

"*Team 1."*

"*We have confirmation. Your target is at the event. You can stand down and come home."*

"*We never confirmed him leaving…"*

"*I repeat, the target's presence is confirmed. Stand down and come home."*

Former Captain and wanted man Eldridge McEvoy shrugged as he acknowledged the order, and turned to the other men in his Humvee.

"It's taken care of, boys. Let's saddle up and get the hell out of here, because the shit's about to hit the fan."

"John?"

Chief John Carter's head shot up; he hadn't heard anyone enter the large RV a block away from the celebration that served as the event's command center, but he got to his feet, definitely pleased to see who it was.

"Hey, Kathy! Come in!"

Kathy Yonker entered and closed the door, looking around at the electronic equipment, radios, and closed circuit TV screens, but most of her attention was reserved for the man sitting in the middle of all of it. Not surprising, as they had been dating since the Revolution, and had been lovers for more than a month now.

"Quite a spread you've got here."

He laughed. "You make me sound like Ben Cartwright." Waving a hand at all the gear, he said, "It's not exactly the Ponderosa, but it's home for tonight. Coffee?"

"Sure," she said, and frowned a little when he limped over to get it for her. "I'm capable of doing that for myself, you know."

"Gee, you graduated med school and are probably the top pathologist in the country; it never occurred to me you might actually be able to figure out the technology of a coffee pot." She giggled at his sarcasm, and he muttered, "Just call me old school and indulge me."

"Me too," she told him with a wink, "and I have to admit a part of me likes it, but it's still hard to get used to."

Holding out the cup, he told her, "I think you'd better start."

She rewarded him with a quick kiss.

"I'll try. So, what are you doing in here all by your lonesome?"

Shrugging, he said, "I'm just monitoring the situation, and that only takes one man. I figure the rest will be needed out there on crowd control more than they will here." He hesitated. "I also had an ulterior motive; I hoped you might show up."

"Oh really? So I'm predictable now?"

"Uh-huh. I've got something for you." Reaching into his pocket he pulled out a small velvet box and opened it, revealing a diamond solitaire. "I'd get down on one knee, but this bum leg…"

She never let him finish; instead she cut off what he was about to say and blocked his mouth with hers by

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way of an answer.

Frank turned away from the pleasant images on TV and groped irritably at his waist for his cell phone. He recognized the number as one from the Waddell-Franklin Building, the Confederacy's temporary office while they were in town, and he figured the incessant beeping was some functionary or the other wanting to know where the hell he was, and why wasn't he at the celebration. In the mood he was in now, he hoped, if that was the case, that the caller had a big ear, because he was about to get it full.

"Gore."

"Frank, this is an emergency!"

He sat bolt upright. Mike Dayton and he had been friends for a long time, and Frank instantly recognized his voice. He also recognized the urgency in it, which both surprised and alarmed him. Mike spent so much time buried in cyberspace that he was normally as unflappable as one of his powerful computers.

"Tell me."

Samantha picked up the tone in her husband's voice and glanced at him worriedly, and Frank cursed himself for not thinking of taking it out of the room, but it was too late for that now.

Mike's voice was clipped and exact.

"We just had a defector come over to us via Kentucky: Colonel Hiram Parsons, from the trial."

"I remember him. Go on."

"The US and Mexico are plotting together against us; from his information, that's the only thing it could be!

"I told you there has been some unusual activity up North. According to Parsons, they've been loading stealth bombers with E-bombs, apparently intended for us."

Frank swore; a couple of Electro Magnetic Pulse weapons – EMPs – would instantly fry every piece of electronic hardware in the Confederacy, and leave them nearly helpless on a modern battlefield.

"When?"

He heard Mike swallow hard.

"Parsons didn't know when, but my guess is tonight, and they're going to do it in conjunction with a Mexican invasion."

Frank felt like he had been kicked in the balls; with the Confederate armor, planes, and communications toast, the Mexicans could run right over them. Before he reacted, though, he had to be sure.

"Is anything else happening to indicate this scenario?"

"One: the Russians have informed us that there are massive and growing heat signatures just the other side of the Rio Grande, apparently vehicles warming up in every single one of the staging areas we've been monitoring."

He swiftly digested this. This could be additional saber rattling or probing, but then again…

"Two: the US is preparing to launch at least four B2 stealth bombers; they've rolled them out of the hangers and onto the runways. That's just what we know of."

"How many have they launched on previous occasions?"

"Never more than two. Further, despite no official alert, there has been an unusual amount of activity on several US bases today. There's been nothing official and we don't know anything more, but something's definitely going on up there. I'm putting two and two together, and I don't like what I'm getting."

Frank felt cold chills running up his back. He was not a man who believed in coincidence. Billy glanced at the look on his face and then at Cynthia, and both of them wordlessly stood up. They double-checked and cleared their pistols for action, and then Billy went to the back for some heavier artillery.

"Three: we've picked up some unusual cell phone and radio communications in and around Columbia, some of it coming from here in the Waddell-Franklin Confederate Building offices, and the rest from outside. It's conversation but it sounds like it's in some kind of code; we haven't been able to break it yet, but it appears to be centered on the celebrations."

Frank's mind was racing and his heart began pounding, trying to keep up.

"It's not the Marines or Palmetto Militia?"

"No. This is on a different frequency, and one of the speakers has a thick Spanish accent. Wait a minute –

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Frank, the Yankees are taxiing those stealth bombers!"

Another man might have hesitated for fear of being wrong and the resulting embarrassment and damage to his political career. Others might have been concerned that, technically, they did not have the right to order such an alert while senior officers were still alive and functioning. Frank was not another man. When his voice came, it was as clear and staccato as machinegun fire.

"Bunker up, scenario 4, independent northern targeting authorization Gore02458, priority Alpha!"

"Repeat to confirm."

Samantha's face went white as she heard her husband repeating the code sequence. She didn't know exactly what it was, but she knew enough to know it couldn't be good. So did their bodyguards; his bearded face set, Billy nodded at Cynthia as he passed her submachine gun to her. Watching him slip his right arm through the strap of the 'whippit" gun, she nodded back in understanding, her mouth set in a grim line.

"Further instructions?" Mike asked.

"Notify the Southwestern militias, the upper South border state forces, and all Marine units in those areas to go on highest alert; they may be about to have company. Notify the US and Mexico that our airspace is now closed; anything coming across either border is to be considered a target of opportunity to be engaged at will without warning. Any military aircraft we've got near either border, I want them in the air *now*!"

As Cynthia passed Samantha's .357 to her, Frank glanced at the TV screen only to see that the cameraman had focused on Donna, holding up a squealing Linda so she could get a better look at the fireworks. It suddenly came to him that, with all the leadership of Dixie gathered together in one place…

Oh my God!

Suddenly he was on his feet and shouting frantically into the phone.

"Call our people and get them the hell out of that celebration – *Do it now, damn it! Do it now! We'll meet at the Confederate Building!*"

Frank didn't even wait until he finished mashing the disconnect button to terminate the call to continue.

"Everybody! Get ready to bug out! We leave in five minutes!"

He was already pressing more buttons.

"Captain Drucci here."

"This is General Gore."

"Sir!" Danny was obviously glad to hear from him, but Frank didn't give him time for any pleasantries.

"Danny, this is a priority one emergency! Do you have any people at the celebration?"

"No sir; the Irregulars are all pulling perimeter patrol, mainly outside the city limits. The cops and regular militia are handling crowd control at the Capitol."

"*Damn it!"* he swore in fear and frustration, "Have someone call them and begin a full emergency evacuation of that whole area right now! There's an attack coming, and I think that's the target!"

Danny was an Irregular to the bone; Frank had spoken, so he wasted no time asking questions, but instead yelled at someone in the background, relaying the instructions word-for-word before answering the General.

"It's done, sir; they're contacting the militia on-site right now!"

"Good! Now I need you and every one of the Irregulars you can lay your hands on here at my residence ASAP! Come locked, loaded, and ready to go hot at *any* hostiles. If there is *any* attempt to stop you by *anyone*, you have authorization to use deadly force. Most of all get here fast! I need you *yesterday!*"

"We're on our way, sir!"

Frank heard his wife scream and he turned in time to see the pixels on the TV depicting the Columbia celebrations explode in a flash of white light and static, and an instant later his windows rattled and the ground itself vibrated with the massive shock wave that swept across the city.

"What're you saying? I can't hear!" Sam shouted into the cell phone as the fireworks exploded, the crowd cheered, and little Linda squealed with delight in his other ear. He thought it was Mike Dayton's voice on the other end, but he couldn't even be certain of that, let alone whatever words he was trying to say. If the phone hadn't had a vibrate function, he would never have known it was ringing.

"Get the hell out of there, Sam! Sound an alert and get the Congress out now! Tell Tommy and Donna!" The

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Intelligence Chief was growing increasingly frantic and was literally screaming into the phone; neither President Edge nor Vice President MacFie had answered their rings, and it would take someone with high authority to get the crowd up and moving in the middle of the celebration.

To Sam, all he could tell was that there was a voice on the other end, and that was about it. Glancing at the number in irritation and confirming it was Mike, he replied, just in case the Intelligence Officer could hear him, "Hang on a minute; I'll go somewhere I can hear and call you right back." Clicking the disconnect button, he dropped the phone in his pocket and passed Linda to Donna.

"Hold her for just a minute; Mike's trying to tell me something and I and I can't hear a word he's saying. I'll be right back."

A minute later he ducked into the Capitol Building and moved down the hall toward the back, away from the noise outside that echoed through the front doorway, and bumped into Vika a second time, who was bouncing on the balls of her feet, twisting her head back and forth, and looking distinctly uncomfortable. The lines to the porta-johns were impossibly long, so she had gone inside only to find the nearest restroom out of order, and by now she was so desperate she was contemplating looking for an unlocked office with a trashcan.

"Sam, do you know where the bathroom is here? I really need to go!"

"Just a minute; I've got to take this call, and then I'll show you." He dialed the number, and pressed the phone tightly to his ear as Edge's fiancée shifted her weight from one foot to another in urgency. Mike was there on the first ring.

"Mike, wha –"

"Get everybody out of there now, Sam! They're getting ready to launch an attack against the celebration!"

Others might have wasted time asking for details, but Sam never even bothered to press the disconnect or put the phone back in his pocket this time; instead he took the first step of the run that would have carried him back down the hall, out the door, and into the crowd, back to the Congress, to Donna and Tommy, and especially to Linda. He shouted even as he moved.

"Vika! Get the hell out of here! We're under attack!"

"Jonathon!"

"I'll get him! Go to the Confederate Building!"

Her need forgotten and his orders ignored, she lifted her foot to start after him.

Suddenly the world filled with noise, force and fury, and Sam, with split-second instincts hard-learned on the battlefield, spun and dove at her and knocked her to the ground, throwing himself on top of her even as the blast flung them like leaves down the hall and the building began collapsing around them.

Four blocks west of Main Street, Pete Leach looked up to see his boss standing in the doorway of the Confederate Building office he was temporarily occupying while they were in town. LC Tarbox crooked his finger at him.

"Come with me, Pete."

Pushing his chair back from his desk and bringing his scrawny frame erect, he smiled hopefully, thinking the Congressman was finally going to let him go see the celebration, but he quickly saw it was not to be. Instead of heading downstairs, he followed Tarbox to the windowless conference room acting as Congressional Chambers in the very center of the building's first floor, where they entered and Tarbox took a seat.

"What's up, sir?"

Ignoring the question, the Congressman said through an unusually broad, toothy smile, "You'd better sit down."

The puzzled Leach had just started to obey when the whole building suddenly began shaking, almost rolling, throwing him into the floor before he could take his seat. The sounds of shattering glass filled the air as every window blew out at once, along with the multiple impacts of things falling over and slamming against the east wall, followed by a deafening roar that almost seemed to fill the whole universe. As the main noise died, there was a rising cacophony of shouts, demands, and screams from the wounded staffers elsewhere in

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the building who had been watching the fireworks from the windows and had been slashed by the flying glass.

The gaping secretary frantically stammered, “W-wha...What in the hell was that?”

Tarbox’s smile grew even broader until he was positively beaming.

“That, my friend, was the sound of our ship finally coming in.”

He began laughing then, and couldn’t seem to stop, and, after a moment, once Pete realized the reason for his humor, he laughed along with him.

There was no inkling of what was going to happen, no time to think, no time to even blink. The C4 explosive, pre-packed into the 4” line the Mexican crew had fed beneath Columbia’s Main Street months ago exploded. For six blocks, the street erupted at more than twenty-four thousand feet per second as nearly six pounds of high explosive for every foot of line detonated at once, literally under the feet of tens of thousands. The pavement disintegrated and went upwards and outwards in a flesh-shredding hailstorm of smoke, fire and debris reaching hundreds of feet in the air, although the flesh in its way was already coming apart in the supersonic blast wave. Like a tsunami, the force slammed against the buildings, driving every window and many of the facing walls through their interiors, and sometimes out through the back, even as the ground heaved and shifted beneath their foundations. By the time it was over, nearly a quarter of the structures on both sides of the street began to tilt forward toward the blast again, dropping their rubble or wholly collapsing like giant brick and stone trees into the trench that had been a street, and onto the shattered ruins of humanity who had been there only seconds before. The line of destruction pointed straight as an arrow, towards the capitol...or what had been the capital.

The fake sewer pipes had been big ones, thirty feet long and 12” in diameter, and there were two of them on the lawn, one on each side of the main walk, halfway between it and either end of the building. More than three thousand pounds of plastic explosive blew at the same time as that under the street, and most of South Carolina’s Capitol building, along with everyone gathered in front of it and around it, abruptly ceased to exist.

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CHAPTER 47

Aboard USAF 1

"Mr. President! Priority one!"

President Plants turned his head rather than swiveling the luxurious leather chair to look at the Marine Lieutenant manning the jet's communications system.

"Go ahead."

"Sir, the Confederate forces just went on full alert."

"What?" He jerked upright in his leather upholstered swivel chair, accidentally bumping the Secret Service Agent standing beside him, his eyes instinctively going toward his Vice President. Against all standard operating procedure, he had insisted that Roberts accompany him on this flight so he could keep an eye on him, and not be surprised by anymore of his undermining of Plants' presidential authority. In hindsight, he had to admit it was a damned good idea, especially when he saw his paling expression as the planned strike currently underway was laid out for him for the first time. He wondered if Roberts had gotten hold of some inkling of what was happening, but was reassured by the change in his expression from fear to raw terror. "But their Congress-"

"They must have known something. The alert was issued approximately two minutes *before* the action in Columbia. We believe it was issued by the Confederate Secretary of Defense, Franklin Gore."

"Damn it! Can we go ahead with the mission anyway?"

"I wouldn't advise that, sir." This time it was Admiral Sanchez, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff who spoke. "That alert isn't a normal one; it's an authorization for independent firing. If any strike is launched from our side, all their surviving subs and missile silos have clearance to fire at will, and our analysts believe they will certainly launch. Our intelligence tells us that all our major cities and military installations will be the targets of multiple nuclear warheads, dirty bombs, and possibly even chemical or biological agents, sir; we ended up having to leave a lot of that down there. Even most of our malware that we've gradually slipped into their computer systems can't be remotely activated, because the alert slammed shut their international internet portals and most of their internal ones; they still have control of most if not all their major installations. If that wasn't bad enough, their Virginia Class submarine, the *Hunley,* was on maneuvers near the mouth of the Chesapeake Bay and immediately submerged, complete with a full compliment of missiles. We have no idea where it is, beyond the general area, and well within reach of Washington. We don't even have that on their Ohio Class Trident, the *Dixon.*"

"But we have the stealth bombers!"

"So do they, sir, plus not only our detection technology, but also that of the Russians and Japanese. We really don't know their capabilities. If they manage to detect a single plane, they will certainly launch.

"For that matter, even if the attack itself is a success, we don't know the EMP weapons' effects in the real world; only in simulation. We also don't know the exact amount or process of defensive hardening of their missile sites to blunt just such an attack, or the EMP's effect on their submarines below water, presuming the *Dixon* is even in the area."

The President pulled at his face in frustration.

"Why the hell didn't somebody tell me this before?"

Sanchez took a slow and deliberate breath to calm himself before answering. "I did, Mr. President, during the briefings and planning sessions."

Plants glared at him, but was too angry over the failure staring him in the face to chew him out at the moment.

So much planning, and now...

He fell back on his old arguments. "Surely we can win any such an exchange!"

"No doubt of it," Admiral Sanchez told him in a deadpan voice, trying not to sound as if he was repeating himself from a dozen times previously. "Unfortunately, we may lose between one third and one half of the

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urban population of the United States in the process, sir, and likely that much of our military infrastructure. The Confederates know they can't win, but they are willing to take as many of us as they can down with them before they fall. The United States would be literally prostrate, and I don't have to tell you what China and Russia will do if presented with such an opportunity."

The Chief Executive's face hardened. "It's a chance we'll have to take. I'm not going to be the one to lose Lincoln's Union!"

Vice President Roberts looked at Woody, and saw the man nod.

I can't do this! God help me, I can't do this!

Even as his mind screamed its doubts, his hand reached inside his jacket and into his shirt pocket for the deadly pen the head of his Secret Service detail had given him. Holding it in his numb hand, he approached the President.

"We can't destroy America!"

"You don't get it, do you? I'm not destroying this country; I'm saving it – all of it, including the part *you* were willing to lose."

Coming closer, within arm's reach now, the Vice President tried one final time.

"I can't let you do this. I won't let you do this." He was shocked at how calm his voice was, considering what he was about to do.

"Won't let me? Damn you, who the hell do you think you are? I'm the President of the United States, you cowardly little shit, and I'll do whatever the hell I want to!"

Almost without volition, Roberts stabbed with the pen, only to have his wrist snatched in a grip that stopped its forward motion dead even as its impact knocked the killing tool from his hand. At the same time, he heard the Secret Serviceman assigned to the President shout, "Weapon!"

Oddly enough, even as his arm was being twisted into the first stages of the agonizing arm lock that would immobilize him, some part of Robert's brain recalled the man's record, that he was ex-CIA, and obviously he had recognized the combination of object and intent.

I wonder how long they'll let me live? He wondered with a strange detachment even as the pain of joints twisting well beyond their limits set in and he started toward the floor.

There was a sharp *Crack!* and the pressure on his arm abruptly released. The agent who had been holding him hit the carpet with a thud, the Glaser Safety Slug having done what it was designed to do: come apart inside the victim's skull like a mini-grenade full of fine birdshot, expending all its energy internally shredding its target, rather than carry through to damage people and airplane hulls beyond.

From the corner of one eye, Roberts saw Woody swivel to point the still-smoking handgun at the Lieutenant and the General, both of whom suddenly froze halfway to a standing position. From the corner of the other, he saw Plants trying to get out of his chair.

The President was halfway to his feet and starting to turn, only to see a small .380 automatic pistol appear in his Vice President's hand as if by magic. He had brought the pistol as a backup. It – the assassination, not the method – had been unspoken if understood; if it came to this, the job would fall to him, not to some underling who would be thrown to the wolves afterwards.

"What the hell's going on here?" Plants was shouting, "What the hell are you doing?"

Roberts's voice was shaking, but his hand was steady. "I'm saving what's left of the United States from the actions of a madman."

No one ever knew what Plants was about to say next; Roberts assumed it would be something cliché and asinine, like, "Are you crazy?" or "You'll never get away with this!" or maybe even, "How dare you!" Right now, he didn't have time to listen. He squeezed the trigger and kept on squeezing until the clip was empty, and President Plants' shattered head was leaking all over the carpet where his body had fallen beside its chair.

Roberts turned to the Admiral.

"I take it you are familiar with the line of succession in case the President can no longer perform his duties?"

"Yes sir; the Vice President assumes his office."

"Good! Then get those damned planes back!"

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The Admiral looked at him calmly for just a second, and then nodded and said, "Yes, Mr. President," before resuming his seat, grabbing his microphone and giving the order. The Marine junior officer seemed to be more than happy to follow his superior's example.

"Good work, Mr. President," Woody told him with genuine admiration, lowering his pistol but keeping it in his hand hanging beside his pants leg, "I'm glad you decided to have a backup plan." Looking at the body, he added, "even if it is a little harder to explain."

"Call me old school," he said, attempting flippancy even as his stomach roiled and the words the Agent had said – 'Mister President – echoed through his head, and then the awesomeness of the responsibility that went with it slammed down on his shoulders, bowing them under its weight.

The king is dead; long live the king! Came the unbidden words.

Roberts promptly threw up in the trash can, leaning on the chair's armrest with his right hand, the pistol still in it.

Admiral Sanchez waited until he finished and had slumped into the chair Plants had just vacated before saying anything. Turning back to face him, he said, "Sir, there have been two SEAL teams already deployed as well…"

"Can they be recalled?"

"No sir, it's too late for that."

Shit!

"Then notify the Confederate Government of a navigational error, and tell them where they'll be. Contact the teams and order them to lay down their arms and surrender to the nearest Confederate authority. We can't destroy the entire country for their sakes."

"Yes sir."

He turned away so he wouldn't have to see the silent accusation in Sanchez' eyes, or the eagle and trident emblem on his Navy uniform.

Live Newscast, Columbia, South Carolina

"*We're going to go to Bill Gateman, in our eye in the sky chopper to try to make some sense out of what is going on.*

"*Bill, can you hear us? What do you see?"*

"*Oh my God, Sally! Oh my God!"*

"*Bill? What's happened? Are you all right? Why are you crying?"*

"*There's been a massive explosion on the site of the celebrations! There's smoke and fire everywhere! Buildings have been blown down all along Main Street, and it looks like the front half of the State Capital facing Gervais Street is just…gone. There appears to be a-a huge crater in the capital lawn at the intersection of Gervais and Main where the celebrations were going on! Oh my God, the Congress!"*

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CHAPTER 48

Richmond, Virginia

"You know you could have gone to Columbia."

Rachel sat beside Lucky Charlie on the couch, her legs tucked beneath her, and shook her head. She sat to his right, his good side. It wasn't as if she minded the scars so much, but this way she could read his expressions.

Besides, this side is so handsome it makes me forget about the rest.

"Not without you."

"Just because I'm on call here doesn't mean you and Johnny have to miss out on all the fun."

Shaking her head stubbornly, she told him, "No. Both of us will have more fun right here watching it with you on television than we ever could by ourselves in a strange city. Isn't that right, Johnny?"

"Mmmrfrumph..." the boy replied around a mouthful of popcorn from his seat on the carpet, where he had aligned a group of toy soldiers for deployment during commercial breaks. Rachel smiled and looked back to Charlie.

"That was a 'yes,' in case you couldn't understand. Now, eat your popcorn." When he gave no reaction, she asked, "Charlie? Is there something wrong, honey?"

Shaking his head slowly, the undamaged side of his mouth turning up in a satisfied smile, he replied, "Not a damned thing. I was just thinking."

"About what?"

"That's a dangerous question to ask a man."

She could tell he was teasing, and gave him a playful bump.

"Come on."

"All right. I was just thinking about how wonderful it is to have a family, and how much I love the both of you."

Laying her head over on his shoulder to hide her suddenly-watering eyes, she told him, "We love you too; you know that!"

He nodded and said, "I know," but Rachel couldn't shake the feeling there was something more he wanted to tell her. Charlie tended to keep a large part of himself hidden away, but his girlfriend was insatiably curious about the man she loved, and wouldn't let it rest.

"I've got the feeling there's something else."

Charlie sighed. He was frightened; since meeting Rachel and her son, his world had finally, for the first time in his life, become idyllic, and he was afraid to do anything that might rock this boat they had built for themselves. He knew all too well what he looked like.

Still, I owe her this!

"Rachel...would you be willing to think about planning a little ceremony of our own?"

It took her a moment to realize what he meant, and the tears flowed even freer as she turned her face up to his and said, "I thought you'd never ask."

By the time Johnny sensed movement behind him, he looked back over his shoulder to see the pair on the couch in the middle of a deep kiss.

"Oh yuck, you two!" he muttered in his best adult voice, causing them to break apart with a laugh.

"Johnny," his mother said, "Lucky Charlie is going to be your father!"

The boy scratched his head with a hand covered in popcorn butter.

"But...I thought he already was."

Charlie had to swallow down a big lump in his throat at that one, and was just getting ready to reach out to

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the boy when the image on the TV exploded. As he watched the footage with his single eye, he felt that long-ago blast once more, and the flames inside that Bradley in Iraq eating his flesh away all over again. The episode only lasted a few seconds, and then the fire took over his soul, and he bounced to his steel feet, the unmarked side of his face snarling even more frightfully than the twisted scar tissue of the other.

"Get my uniform!"

Pocahontas County, West Virginia

Watching the celebrations on TV, Jack Boggess cursed himself, wanting to be there. He had gone skiing in West Virginia's Canaan Valley a couple of weeks ago, taking advantage of an abnormally lingering spell of cold weather, helped along by the lodge's snow making equipment. He had been having the time of his life when a careless teenage snowboarder had unexpectedly cut in front of him.

You might know that little shit would be able to get up and walk away!

Jack wasn't so lucky; through a freak of impact, he had broken both his lower legs. Now, richer by several pins, screws and other surgical hardware beneath a pair of casts that itched like a son of a bitch, he was reduced to sitting in his recliner at home and watching the biggest celebration in the new country he helped build on television, instead of being there in the front row with the rest of the Congressmen, making political points in the process.

Looking at Philindy and Tiffany, and knowing how he had caused them to miss it, he felt even worse, especially for the girl. She had been planning to see her boyfriend Rick Carmichael for a month now, and then this had to happen. She never complained, but there was no question she was disappointed.

All those thoughts were instantly shunted aside and blown apart four hundred miles away in Columbia while he was forced to watch helplessly from his suddenly uncomfortable living room.

As they stared wide-eyed at the image on the TV screen, Jack Boggess began to shake, and his fingers dug into the arms of his recliner, heedless of the cloth tearing under his powerful grip.

No! Not now! Not now!

Beside him, he heard Philindy crying. Her hands rose to cover her face, less to stifle her grief than an instinctive need to try to hide from the horror she had just witnessed, to try to block it out.

Tiffany screamed: a horrible tearing sound made up of pain and fury. She was on her feet in an instant and out of the room.

I loved them! I loved them all! And Rick! Why? Why!

Running from the living room with no destination in mind, just the instinctive need to flee from the pain, she found herself in the hallway, and found herself looking at what was hanging on the wall. She reached up for Jack's gun rack and snatched up the M4 with the M203 grenade launcher crouching beneath its barrel. She didn't know what she intended to do with it, but at least it felt good to hold; it felt solid, something, *anything* to hang onto: something to give her the feeling she wasn't completely helpless.

Catching her reflection in the hall mirror, she frowned. There was a barefoot little girl looking back at her, looking younger than her age in her pink flannel nightgown with a kitten transfer ironed onto its front, and a black military assault rifle in her hands. Her eyes, though...

She put out a hand, and touched the reflection with her fingertips as if to make sure it was real. She couldn't remember looking like this before. She wasn't frightened anymore, even though she knew she would probably end up back in a camp –

Like hell I will! I'll die first, and take a bunch of them with me this time!

No, this face was angry. It was beyond angry now, while all of her hopes and dreams, both for her world and for herself, burned in the pyre of Columbia and fueled her growing rage until she shook with it.

I wish I had those sons of bitches right here, right now!

As if in answer, the scuff of a boot on the front step got her attention, and her head jerked in the direction of the living room door, not twenty feet away. Something in that single sound brought her fury-heightened senses

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on full alert. It had a wrongness about it somehow, a sense of sneakiness.

It's probably someone bringing news, but I don't think so!

Stepping back to the gun rack, she momentarily slung the weapon over her shoulder to get it out of the way, grabbed a handful of clips and a pouch of grenades, and lifted up the front of her flannel gown to deposit them in the resulting fold of cloth, making the kitten look like he was sitting on them. Then she moved across the hall to the corner of the bedroom door, stacked the ammo, unlung the M203 and, waited, her rifle trained on the front entryway and her finger on the trigger.

Tiffany heard feet shifting again, then a loud impact an instant before the door, driven by the force of the makeshift battering ram made from a steel sewer pipe full of concrete knocked it open. The girl's heart leaped, not with fear, but with a wild joy that she was finally going to pay somebody back for everything that had been taken away from her. Some part of her knew it must be wrong to feel that way, but right now, she didn't care.

Before the falling door even hit the ground, Tiffany held the trigger back and hosed down the portal, along with the walls on either side of it. There were startled yells, panicked screams, and bodies falling, and then a black, egg shaped object came flying in to thump on the hardwood floor. She jerked her head back just before the concussion grenade exploded, and the wall protected her from the main part of the blast. Before the echo died away, she shoved the weapon back around the corner, slipped her finger forward to the second trigger, the one that operated the M203, lunged forward once more, and fired.

The fragmentation grenade zipped past the first man's head, who was just entering on the heels of the blast, and hit the one following him right in the mouth, where it detonated, spewing shrapnel and meat across the porch and into the house, shredding the flesh of the attack team. The man actually hit was instantly decapitated halfway down the breastbone, and the one inside dropped facedown and lifeless on the floor, his back and limbs peppered and his brain stem severed by flying bits of steel. The remaining four outside didn't fare much better.

Tiffany dimly felt a piece of the flying shrapnel slash deeply across the back of her right hand, parting the flesh to the bone, but she ignored the burning pain and slammed in another magazine. Aiming carefully, she began firing bursts through the front wall of the house, striking just a few inches from the floor, in order to hit anyone that might be lying on the porch outside. One loud gurgling cry indicated she had done exactly that.

"Philindy! Jack! There're people attacking us!" she yelled needlessly, and kept on firing.

The instant Tiffany's first gunshots rang out, Jack had already used his arms to vault out of the chair and throw himself down on the floor with a yell and a groaning curse from the pain of his broken bones grinding together inside their protective fiberglass casts. Despite the agony, he had already reached into his belt for his 9mm Berretta, when he heard the back door shattering at the other end of the house.

"Philindy! Get down!"

Naturally paranoid due to the recent Revolution, like many who had gone through it, they had weapons stashed all over their house. That's why, before she obeyed, Philindy was able to snatch a hand grenade off the end table, pull the pin, and fling it blindly down the hall toward the rear of the house. There was a dull thud when it glanced off the wall, followed by a louder thud when it landed on the kitchen floor, and a short, almost inaudible rumble as it rolled on the tiles before it went off with a bang.

Jack heard someone yelling orders, and as Philindy grabbed her own weapon, he began firing blindly through the wall at the sound, the full metal jacketed bullets speeding through the plaster on both sides of the intervening room with no problem at all, making life interesting for the survivors and getting their undivided attention. They had just begun returning fire in a similar manner, filling the air with wallboard dust, flying paint chips, and shattering pictures and knickknacks, when Philindy crawled to the doorway and lunged forward, sticking her pistol around the corner. Her sites were instantly filled with a man's face who was crawling toward her, not over ten feet away, and she squeezed the trigger as much by reflex than intent. His eyes widened with surprise before bulging from their sockets from the hydrostatic shock of the 9mm bullet passing through his skull.

"Get back and get down!"

It was Tiffany's voice, and Philindy jerked her head around, then threw herself bodily back into the room at the sight of the M16/203 pointing right at her. No sooner was she clear than the 40mm barrel fired and a

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grenade flew down the hall, impacting and detonating against the edge of the kitchen table and filling the room with shrapnel. Then the teenager turned and fired another burst toward the vicinity of the front door, just in case anyone had decided to try to get in that way again.

Nobody was; all they could hear were yells and shouted orders outside that were fading away with distance, and someone moaning and gurgling wetly in the kitchen.

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CHAPTER 49

Samantha sat in rigid silence as she watched, her mouth open and working soundlessly while her tears ran in a steady stream as the TV cameras switched to different, surviving views that showed the full scope of the destruction. Only one thought could come to her, and it came, over and over, hitting her soul like automatic weapons fire.

Oh God! My baby! My baby!

Maybe the worst of all was that she had absolutely no doubts; despite its logical impossibility, she would swear to her dying day she heard Linda loudly cry "Mommy!" right in her ear, just once. Then she was all too aware of a piece of her being torn away on the inside, replaced with nothing but empty space that could never be wholly filled again.

Frank didn't hear the voice, but he felt like part of his soul was being ripped out with a meat hook. As little more than an instinctive survival mechanism, he began rapidly slamming the doors in his mind, tuning out the unimaginable horror of what had just happened, locking it away until he could deal with it.

And just how in the hell do you think you can deal with this?

The locket against his chest burned like a fire coal to match the inferno that began building inside him, but for the moment, all he could do was to grab his wife and pull her to him, holding her with one arm. Despite his efforts, his own tears for his little girl were falling unheeded as his free hand hit the speed dial again. The voice on the other end answered quickly and brusquely.

"Boggess. I'm kinda busy right now!" Suddenly he shouted, "Damn it, Tiff, get down!"

Frank could hear Philindy yelling something, the distant thumping of chopper blades, and a popping of gunfire in the background.

"Jack? This is Frank!"

There was a dead silence on the line, other than the background noise of battle.

"I don't have time for bullshit! *You talk to me, damn it*!"

"I just saw you die," he said lamely, "It was on TV."

Frank allowed a second's thought about little Linda to break through and sobbed once.

Yeah, I reckon you did just see me die.

"That was – my friends and my little girl. I-I let them use my seat."

"Oh my God, buddy, I'm so sorry!" From the breaking of his voice, there was absolutely no doubt he meant it, but Frank didn't have time for it.

"We'll all have time for sorry later!" he said harshly. "This was an inside job, and to top it off, I've got about a million Mexicans getting ready to invade across Texas, New Mexico, and Arizona, and the Yankees setting up for something big up North! Do a full call up of your Mountaineer Militia and be ready for anything!"

"I've already begun it, but it's more than that! Hold one; it might get hard to hear."

Frank's ear was filled with a loud but low roar.

"There, you damned sons of bitches!" he heard his friend yell in the background. "I reckon that settled you!"

"Sorry; someone decided to send a hit team after me. Unfortunately for them, Tiff saw them coming, shot 'em up good, and got them in retreat; then I called in an air strike and napalmed the mountainside below my own house. Damned good thing I live in the country or else my neighbors would be a little pissed." He realized he was blathering in all the excitement, and forced himself to pause. "I hear some scattered shooting; sounds like my boys are mopping up whatever's left. After the napalm, it's probably a mercy."

"Take any of them you can alive; we need to know who's behind this."

He heard the Mountaineer speaking into the radio before returning to the phone.

"They will if they can – no promises, though."

"Understood; just have them and whatever intel you can get in the meantime ready to ship."

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"Sure thing; you watch your ass down there."

"You do the same, and one more thing: do you know of any Congressmen or cabinet officers besides you who missed this event?"

"Ye-e-eah, I do. Lets see, TJ Ashby is still in Japan doing that trade summit with the car makers…Wait a minute! I noticed on TV that horse's ass from North Carolina, Tarbox, wasn't there. His seat was empty!" His voice was suddenly full of horrified realization. "Frank! Do you think…"

Frank's face hardened as he digested the information and came to the same probably conclusion as the pieces began snapping into place.

"You just get your people ready and keep that phone nearby, you hear? I'll be calling."

Part of him heard Samantha sobbing wildly as he tucked the starched legs of his gray fatigue pants into his combat boots. Her agonized cries were like wolf howls, and cut his soul like knives, and he could hear the same screaming madness hammering incessantly at the iron doors inside his own skull, but he refused to give way to it; he desperately wanted to, to lose himself in grief, but he couldn't. He had too many responsibilities.

Damn it! Why can't I just be a man for once? Just an ordinary father…Oh God!

Grinding his teeth together, he jerked the laces of his boots tight before tying them off and standing up. Three strides took him to the closet, and he took down the web gear hanging on the back of the door and strapped it on, making sure his combat knife, holster, and spare ammo were where they should be.

There would be no dress uniforms this time, because Frank Gore wasn't going to work or to a party or to a political function; he was going to war. He didn't know for sure with whom yet, and he didn't care who they were; he was going to find them, he was going to fight them, and he was going to kill them all. He slapped the black Marine beret on his head, and his cell phone rang again.

"Sir? Hodges here."

Frank wasn't surprised to hear the former skinhead's voice; the fiercely loyal officer wasn't likely to be absent when his commander needed him.

"Go ahead, Colonel." His voice wasn't calm; it was flat and dead, diamond hard and cold as a razor's edge.

"Our estimated ETA is two minutes."

"Watch yourself; there will almost certainly be hostiles in the area. They just tried to kill Boggess up in West Virginia."

"Will do, sir." There was a pause, then a gulp. "I…I saw Linda…on TV. I'm sorry, sir; *damn it, I'm so sorry!* We all are." Without waiting for a response, he simply said, "Out."

Turning to the driver of the first of the Bradley Fighting Vehicles, he shouted in a rage, "Put your foot in it! If somebody won't move, knock 'em out of the way or go right over top of them – I don't give a shit! You just get us there now! Frank needs us!"

"Yes sir!" the equally angry man replied as he stomped the throttle wide open, and their path was marked by shouting motorists and crushing metal as they punched their way through the crowded streets by sheer brute force, a string of Strikers and Humvees closely following in his wake like pilot fish following a shark. *Frank needs us* was the unofficial motto of the Irregulars, and especially now, after what had happened it was all the impetus required for any of them to charge straight down the maw of Hell itself with guns blazing and bayonets fixed, ready and willing to stab the Devil in the ass.

"This is Colonel Hodges," he said into the microphone, "Everyone make sure you're locked and loaded; you have clearance to fire at will at anything that even looks hostile!"

Hanging on tightly to the grab handles, the big man with the shaved head and tattooed arms glared savagely at the night. Hodges wasn't much of a praying man, but after what had happened, he earnestly asked God to let the hostiles be there. He wasn't the only one making that particular plea; the wide savage eyes and bared teeth of all of them clearly showed Irregulars desperately wanted some payback, and they were determined to get it. If they had their way, somebody was in for a whole world of hurt!

Billy, blinking tears out of his eyes, dropped the curtain. Thinking of his friends, his country, and Frank and Sammie's daughter, his voice was breaking when he spoke.

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“They're coming. Let’s go.”

They opened the door, the big man exiting first with Frank right behind him. Samantha, shaking with grief and shock, was next, leaning on Frank’s left arm with, at her husband’s insistence, a pair of high grade armored vests hung over her to cover her protruding stomach. Cynthia was last, a Czech Skorpion machine pistol in her hand, muzzle pointing upward toward the ceiling. The weapon was small and a little underpowered, but it fit her perfectly, and she had fully mastered it.

They barely made it to the porch before they realized they didn’t recognize the men in the Humvee that had just slowed down in front, and the uniformed men were staring back at them in open-mouthed shock. Frank saw the only one of them who looked vaguely familiar sitting in the passenger seat and mouthing the words, ‘That’s them!’ Hands began reaching for weapons.

“Back!” Frank shouted before jerking up his forty-five and blasting a hollow-nosed round through the vehicle's window and into the driver’s chest.

Cynthia jerked Samantha back inside so hard the larger woman lost her balance, and the girl was suddenly left using all her coordination to make her boss’ fall to the floor as controlled as possible, and the best she could do was to throw herself underneath her as they hit the floor together. Before they had even hit the carpet, Billy’s big hand closed around the foregrip of the ‘whip-it’ gun. When he lifted the forearm, the stock settled against his shoulder and he began squeezing the trigger. Despite the too-short length of pull and the brutally painful recoil from the unpadded metal, he had practiced enough to be accurate as he walked his shots down the length of the vehicle, sending glass and dozens of double-ought chunks of death flying through the cab and rear as Frank did the same with his forty-five.

With three lead buckshot in his skull and a copper-jacketed slug in his chest cavity, the dying driver’s foot convulsed on the accelerator and the vehicle slammed into a utility pole in front of the house, making the wires shake wildly.

“Down, Frank!”

He heard Cynthia’s voice shout in his ear and instantly dropped to one knee, still firing.

Having disentangled herself from Samantha and having a clear field of fire now, the tiny bodyguard began pouring rapid, controlled bursts into the Humvee’s canvas covered cargo area that were answered by screams from within. The driver’s final act had thrown the men there forward in a tangle of arms, legs and guns, preventing them from exiting the vehicle and leaving them meat for the slaughter.

As he ejected his spent magazine, Frank was dimly aware that Samantha had crawled forward between him and Billy, and, lying on the floor on her side because of her belly, was blasting into the enemy with her Smith & Wesson, the hollow point bullets shredding the cab. She was screaming in a berserk fury that surpassed that of any of the rest of them.

“You killed my baby! You killed my baby!” she shrieked over and over again, unable to stop herself and not even aware she was doing it. The pain inside her was so great that everything that had happened to her at the hands of the Federal torturers years ago paled to insignificance beside it. Its white-hot agony filled her soul and overflowed as pure rage.

Thumper knocked Cynthia and Frank aside and cleared Samantha with a single leap. When he touched down, he made a beeline for the vehicle, a white streak in the night.

“Watch out for Thumper!” Frank yelled, and by the time he got the last word, the big bulldog had leaped from the ground, barely touched the driver’s window frame, and was inside and doing what he did best. His angry roaring and the screams from whoever he had hold of filled the night, and let them know there was at least one survivor in there, for the moment anyway.

Suddenly a large section of door facing near Frank’s head blew out from an impact, sending splinters into his forehead and ripping the left side of it open an inch above his eyebrow, an instant before a shot sounded from up the street as the assassins’ back-up team got into the action. Heedless of his own safety, Billy swept Frank back with a hard blow of his forearm and returned a blind blast of buckshot in the direction of the sound. Before he could close the door, there came a roaring of gunfire – including, unless Frank missed his guess, a mini-gun and an automatic grenade launcher that sent shrapnel flying through the neighborhood – and the deafening slam of one vehicle against another.

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The Irregulars had entered the fight, and it was over in seconds. Other than the primal battle cries, savage curses, and Rebel yells of the Irregulars, the groans and screams of the wounded man in the front seat, the tinkling of falling glass, and the dripping and gurgling of blood, and the fierce growls from the bulldog, the night was rapidly getting quieter.

"Thumper!" Frank called out, "Hold him!"

"General Gore!" Are you okay?"

Frank took a breath and blinked the blood out of his eyes. He would have recognized Danny Drucci's New York Italian accent anywhere, even shouting out of the darkness. He glanced at the other three.

"No one's hit bad here! Just watch the Humvee in front; there may be a couple still alive in there. Anyone alive, I want him to stay that way! I need some prisoners!"

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CHAPTER 50

Packed tightly into the back of the armored Striker, his face a mask of his own drying blood from the wound that one of the Irregulars had hastily pulled together with butterfly tapes, Frank held Samantha to him even while he glared at nothing. The grief and rage was still building like the pressure tank on a flamethrower, and he was ready to go off on something, strike out at anything. A single line from an Old Testament Bible verse kept echoing through his head. *Avenger of the blood...avenger of the blood...avenger...*

The need became a palpable presence, a roaring fire in his heart that threatened to consume him entirely. It would have, if not for his sobbing wife hanging onto him, dampening it slightly with her river of tears. He tuned his glaring eyes up toward the steel roof of the armored vehicle, not seeing it, but looking far, far beyond it.

My baby! My baby! Why, God? Why! You answer me! Why!

Her fists drummed helplessly on her husband's back in grief and frustration, and he never noticed.

"General?" It was Drucci's voice, usually sharp and cocky but now soft and on the verge of tears, "General Gore? Your cell phone's ringing; you want me to get it for you?"

Slowly shaking his head, Frank pulled the electronic device from his cargo pocket and flipped it open before putting it to his ear.

"Gore."

Standing outside the overturned wreckage of his command center, leaning on an equally shaken, bruised and bloody Kathy Yonker, Columbia's Police Chief spoke into his phone.

"Frank?" The voice was harsh and rasping, as though its owner's throat had been scalded. "Good God, I was afraid you were dead!"

"Who is this?"

"John Carter. I've tried calling everybody, but nobody answers. The Governor, the Mayor, everybody was at the celebration; I think they're all dead."

Glancing at the video monitor inside, now turned to the news channel, he could see the view from the still-circling helicopter, nothing but smoke and carnage and destruction, with broken water mains flooding the streets, doubtless drowning survivors pinned in low places beneath the rubble, but failing to put out the blazing jet of flame rising like a pillar of fire from a severed gas line, or other fires burning desultory in the wreckage. The entire front lawn of the Capitol – of where the Capitol used to be – was a gaping pit, looking like some unimaginably giant hand had scooped up the dirt and half the building, along with everything on it or in it.

"I think so too."

"What...what do I do?"

"Until further notice or unless the mayor or governor is found alive, *you* are South Carolina's government now, and this is a state of emergency. I'm appointing you acting Governor; you secure that area and grab every person capable of walking and *make* them get in there to assist! Put out a call to the preachers, and tell them to get their congregations out of the pews and here to help now!" He paused, recalling that he had heard through the grapevine about Carter having a girlfriend, and who she was. "Did Dr. Yonker make it?"

"Yeah, she's with me right now. We were in the command center trailer at the outer edge of the crowd. The explosion blew the trailer over and we're both beat up, but – "

"*We're all beat up, damn it!"* Frank shouted, and then forced himself to be calm through a sheer effort of will. "I'm sorry. I'm a little…just put her on speaker."

"I'm here," she said, her practiced professional voice giving no hint of the pain and horror she felt inside.

"You're in complete charge of the scene itself, with rescue being the number one priority. Anyone who's still alive, I want them to stay that way! Got it?"

"Yeah, I got it, but how far can I go in – "

"You're professionals, both of you, and you don't need me to hold your hands! You've got carte blanche, and you do anything you have to in order to get those people out of there and hold this state together! Do it

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now!”

“Yes s-”

Frank didn’t even give her time to finish her ‘sir’ before he mashed the disconnect button. He had other fish to fry right now, and his skillet was glowing white-hot.

He had to restrain himself to keep from shouting at the driver, already rolling through the city streets at more than fifty miles an hour, to go faster.

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CHAPTER 51

To say that Captain Smith of the Confederate Building's Security Force was surprised was an understatement. The next to the last thing he expected was for a column of fighting vehicles and Humvees full of Palmetto Militia insignia to pull up in front of the steps and start unloading heavily armed Irregulars, who immediately began pushing the press and rubbernecking onlookers back as they set up a perimeter. The last thing he expected was a man he thought was dead to jump down from the back of one of them, drying blood covering the left half of his face, and his equally supposedly-dead wife be gently helped down by him and the soldiers. Once she was on the pavement, two squads of grim-faced men closed tightly in around them with weapons bristling all directions and fingers on the triggers, and the Secretary of Defense and his entourage headed briskly up the steps, accompanied by the roaring and cheering of the crowd, and the shouted questions from the reporters.

The shouts of "What happened, General?" were drowned out by, "Thank God, they're alive! Oh praise Jesus, they're alive!"

Gulping, Smith stepped in front of him, blocking his way.

"I'm sorry, sir, but I can't allow anyone inside by order of the Congress – *uggh!"*

His breath whooshed out when Billy's ham-sized fist, driven by all the night's rage and grief, along with nearly three hundred pounds of weight, slammed upward into his stomach. The blow doubled him up around the punch, lifted him off the ground, and when he touched back down, a hard boot in the face from Hodges picked him up once more and sent him tumbling down the steps, all the way to the sidewalk.

The other two Security Force troopers' hands twitched for their side arms, but were halted by the dark look on Frank's bloody face. The also didn't miss the forest of gun muzzles from the Irregulars that swung in their direction as one, including an automatic grenade launcher and two electrically operated mini-guns mounted on top of the vehicles.

Frank glared at them, never slowing.

"Either use those weapons or get the hell out of my way!"

One of them immediately scrambled clear, while the other grabbed the door and held it open for him.

"I'm glad you made it, sir."

Frank nodded his thanks and then jerked his head towards the man lying unconscious and bleeding at the bottom of the steps. "He's fired; you're in charge of this door now. You take your orders from *no one* but me or the Irregulars!" As the guard stammered his thanks, Frank and the unit – except for a squad left with the vehicles – poured inside.

Once within the building, Frank began giving orders, his voice hard and mechanical, like the precision mechanism of an assault rifle chambering a round in preparation for battle.

"Hodges! Get some more of the men outside to give me a perimeter around this building; nobody who is not one of us enters unless I say so. Detail half the ones remaining to get Sammie and Cynthia to Mike Dayton's temporary office. Secure it and a block of rooms around it; we'll headquarter there. Then fortify the surrounding hallways, and guard them and the intelligence office at *any* cost. If anyone tries to force his way past after a warning, kill him!"

"Yes sir! Second and Third Squads, you heard the General; move your asses! Let's go!"

The hallway echoed with shouts and stomping boots, and Frank grabbed his wife's hand before they could leave with her.

"I'll be there as quickly as I can, Sammie. There's something I've got to do first."

She nodded, her tears flowing.

Oh God, I want him with me so bad!

"I know. Just avenge them, Frank. I can't have them back, but I will have justice! Avenge my baby and Donna and Sam and Tommy! You avenge them! Do you hear me?" Her voice was rising to a scream. *"Avenge them!"*

Frank's gray eyes were as hard as hot flint.

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"Oh, I will! I promise you that – I *will*!"

Congressman Tarbox of North Carolina was just making a point when he heard the handle on the locked doors of the conference room rattle once. He frowned in disapproval, his train of thought momentarily broken; the noise was irritating, particularly since he had given orders that his meeting with the surviving Congress functionaries was not to be disturbed.

What followed was even more disturbing, however. There was a brief roar of fully automatic fire and a torrent of 9mm slugs chewed a hole in the door where the handle had been, sending lead, and bits of metal and wood flying through the room as the shouting men inside dove for cover. There was a hard kick and the double doors flew open. A squad of Irregulars poured inside, left and right, muzzles covering the crowd, and behind them through the shattered door strode Frank Gore.

They were used to seeing Frank in his dress uniform, but now he wore the plain, blood-spattered field gray fatigues, polished black boots, and a black Marine dress beret with the Third National Confederate Flag emblazoned in the form of a shield on its flash. His General's stars were on his shoulders, and his .45 hung from his black nylon web belt. He had changed more than his clothes; the eyes glaring from his bloody face held all the warmth of a shark's.

Watis Suggs was the first to recover. His face split in a relieved grin.

"Damn it, Frank, we thought you were dead!"

"Sit down, all of you!" he barked, then slumped into a chair himself – at the very head of the table – before turning to face his old comrade.

"No, Watis, I'm not dead. Some of the best friends I've ever had in this world are dead, because I insisted they go and enjoy themselves, and use my seats. They had my little girl with them, did you know that? I let them take her because they thought she'd enjoy the fireworks. Some fireworks, huh?"

"Oh No," Suggs sighed, his face pale. "Oh Lord God no!" There were noises of commiseration from all around the table, and a couple of the men had to fight to keep from weeping openly. Whatever their personal feelings towards Frank, little Linda had been the darling of Dixie, as well as everyone who knew her. The big Tarheel looked like he was about to cry himself "I'm so sorry, Frank!"

"Yeah, me too."

"Look, the rescue people are in there now; maybe there's a chance…"

"The center of the crater was right about where they were sitting. Besides, I…I know," he said, tapping his chest. "I can feel it in here. She's gone. They're all gone."

"I'd like to extend my condolences of your losses, General," Tarbox offered with apparent sincerity, "but why did you choose to force your way into a Congressional meeting at this time?"

Suggs was an experienced fighter and never in his life met anything he was afraid of...until now. He had never seen a human face with an expression quite like the one Frank's took on at this very moment: eyes narrowed into slits, forehead wrinkled, nostrils flared, and lips clenched so tightly they were almost invisible. His jaw was solid with tension, and when he spoke, his voice was clipped and cold.

"One: I'm a cabinet level official, the highest ranking survivor known at this time, and thus entitled to be here because I am in charge of the military. Two: there is only one Congressman here – the rest of you are part of the contingents, not Congressmen yourselves, at least at this time. Three: we are now at war, and I am the Secretary of Defense; this is where I belong."

"I never agreed with that provision, and as a representative of the people –"

Even as he interrupted, Frank drew his slab-sided .45 and meaningfully laid it on the table, keeping his hand on it.

"– you still can't hold a Congressional meeting by yourself, let alone appoint other Congressmen, and right now I really don't give a damn what you or anyone else agreed to or not. However, just to show my respect for the Congress, I'd like to bring in another member. Hodges! Patch that call through to the computer in here."

The big skinhead barked an order and, in a moment, Jack Boggess' jug-eared features were glaring back at them from half of a flat screen wall monitor, his hair mussed and his image slightly jerky and pixilated. Next to

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him on the other side of the split screen was the face of Mike Dayton, much clearer and coming from directly within the building.

"Can you hear me, Jack? Mike?"

"Oh yeah," the Mountaineer seethed, the anger hot in his voice. Evidently he had gotten more information. "I hear you." Mike simply nodded, his jaw set and his eyes hard. Once more, this war had cost him someone – this time, several someones – dear to him.

"Good. In a moment, I'd like you to share the story of what happened up there. First though, I'm going to lay out what we know so far.

"This bombing was not an isolated incident; it is a conspiracy between the US and Mexican governments, as well as a group of traitors within our own ranks. Just previous to its occurrence, the United States Government began the first stages of an attack on the Confederacy. If our intelligence hadn't been on the ball, everything would be lost right now. They already had the stealth bombers rolled out onto the runways, we believe equipped with 'E-bombs' targeting our military and communications systems."

"Additions," Mike broke in. "Just after Frank issued the alert causing us to close the military portals to all international electronic communication, there was an unusually large number of spam-type mailings directed towards the Confederacy, mainly from the US. We believe the data was a triggering code for some sort of malware – a cyber-warfare program – that they have managed to insert in our system like a virus. There was some damage, but at the moment anyway, it is largely contained and fairly minimal. My people are working to identify it now even as we speak, and develop a patch.

"The US has also physically landed a pair of SEAL teams, at Norfolk and Charleston respectively. Following the alert, they immediately picked up on the fact that we had given all Confederate nuclear missile crews the command to fire independently against their primary targets – the Northern cities and military installations – in retaliation for a strike of any sort. They backed down, recalled their bombers, and notified us they had *accidentally* deployed the teams in our territory, and gave us their locations. Our forces in the area are rounding them up even as we speak. Both teams have surrendered under orders, but our people are still checking to see if there are any strays."

"Wait a minute!" Dunn, the assistant secretary to the Texas Congress spoke up. "What is this alert you're talking about?"

"One worked out by President Jonathon Edge, Colonel Dayton and myself," Frank told him, "and put in place as a contingency plan in case something like this happened, which he always thought eventually would."

"But…nuclear war?"

"Yes. It was Edge's bet that, even if the Confederacy could not survive such an exchange, the United States would balk at losing half its population and infrastructure in the process of subjugating us. The cost simply would not be worth it." He bared his teeth in what looked like a wolf's snarl. "The Sampson option: if we went, we were going to take one hell of a bunch of them with us. It worked for us once, and we were betting it would work again."

The Texan mopped his brow with his handkerchief.

"I'm damned glad you won that bet."

"We all are. The point is that the US, no doubt the instigator and one side of this triangle, has left the field, at least temporarily.

"Mike?"

"Secondly," the Chief of Intelligence continued, as coldly and precisely as one of his beloved computers, "I've just heard from the militias in Texas, New Mexico and Arizona. The Mexican Army, complete with light armor and fighter jets, came spilling over the border at the major highway crossings in all three states immediately after the bomb blast. Due to our surface to air missiles, the piss-poor quality of the Mexican Air Force, and the skill of our pilots, we are currently winning the air war. Unfortunately the ground war is another matter. Our forces in the area are insufficient to stop them, and are being overrun or pushed back. It is being trumpeted on Spanish language radio as the 'reconquista' of the Southwest."

There was shouting and pandemonium amongst most of the men present, particularly the ones who called that trio of States home. Some of them jumped to their feet, and, in the excitement, everybody else except

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Frank followed their lead. They stood, all yelling questions at the same time, and Frank grabbed the first thing at hand that wouldn't go off – his gift brass knuckles that he had in his pocket as a lucky piece – and pounded on the table.

"Order, gentlemen! Damn it, I said order!" He punctuated the repetition of the order with an especially powerful blow to the table top that sent a chunk of its wood flying. "We don't have time for anything else!

"Mike, notify the Marines and Southwestern militias in the path of the invasion that they are to fall back to the North in a controlled, fighting retreat. I know they can't stop the Mexicans, but I want them to slow them and bleed them as much as practical. They're not to throw their lives away, because they'll be needed in a day or two. Assure them that help is on the way. Right now, their number one priority is to move any civilians in the path of the invasion and to carry off or destroy any fuel supplies ahead of the advance. Do you understand? I don't care if it's a refinery, a filling station, or their own vehicle gas tanks; if they can't pump it out and haul it away, they are to burn it in place. We can't afford to let the enemy have one drop of fuel, not one solitary drop!"

As he spoke, he sensed the faint movement of Mike's rapid typing, and no sooner than Frank finished than the Intelligence Chief pressed a button.

"Done."

"Second, has there been any word from the Mexican President yet?"

"Not yet, but the news from down there says he'll soon be making a speech – "

"Good. Can you triangulate it?"

"I can do better than that. His cell phone is coded and encrypted, but the one belonging to Rosa Mendez, his personal secretary and mistress, is not, and neither are the personal phones of several of his advisors; none of them will be far away from him now. I've already accessed the GPS chips, and the Russian satellites have a fix on them. I know where he is right now"

The men watching Frank found the look in his eyes more than a little disturbing. It would have better fit on the face of a hungry falcon who had just spotted his prey, because there was nothing even remotely human about it.

"Get our stealth bombers over the border to lock onto it. Notify me as soon as he starts that speech, because he's not going to finish it. Where ever that son of a bitch is, I want nothing within a mile of him remaining left alive and standing!"

"Wait a minute, you can't – " Tarbox began, but Mike simply repeated, "Done."

"Three: tell Hardy I want *both* carrier groups deployed and at sea and ready to fight by daybreak – no excuses. The moment they are, the southernmost of the two is to steam south for the Gulf, while the other is to be deployed along the Eastern seaboard as a reserve. Let him make the choice, and then I want him in this office."

"Done."

"Have the states along our northern border deployed their militias to secure that front?"

"All states have already been notified, and are in the process of a 100% call-up, backed up by Naval and Marine Forces."

"Contact Lannigan. I want 90% of our Marine Corps and of our fighters and bombers – and all of our air-to-ground fighters – ready to go by 0-four hundred, and I expect him here in my office before that time!"

"Done."

Frank turned to the men from the Southwest.

"Rest assured, gentlemen, we will turn them back, and then some. Mexico will pay for what it has done." His face twisting, he abruptly slammed the knucks down on the table again, sending another large chip flying. "*By God, they will pay!*"

Spoken with unshakable confidence and unspeakable fury, they found his words reassuring, particularly considering who they came from.

"For the moment, that deals with our external threats; unfortunately, we have more dangerous ones from within. Mike have you managed to raise TJ Ashby yet?"

"I got a message to him, but he doesn't have a secure line at the moment."

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"Keep trying. Jack; tell us what happened."

Boggess told them, cursing a blue streak the whole time.

"The traitors attempting to kill me were my own men – West Virginians, although I'm damned ashamed to admit it. We've managed to take two of them alive so far, and I expect to have some more information out of them within the next couple hours. What we do know is that this is way bigger than just West Virginia and South Carolina."

"Now just a minute!" Tarbox broke in again, angrily. "West Virginia's not even a real Southern State. You've got to expect stuff like that from up there; you can't compare it to the real South."

"If I was down there right now, I'd give you something to compare, you damned son of a bitch!" Boggess shouted from the speakers. Frank ignored him, keeping his eyes on the North Carolina Congressman.

"Let's find out." He gestured at Hodges. "Bring them in."

The skinhead grinned without humor as he keyed his mike. In a moment the grim procession began, bringing in the dead. Heedless of the dripping blood, brains, and released bodily fluids, the Irregulars came dragging the mangled, bullet-riddled bodies of the hit team into the chamber by their feet. Once inside, they simply released them to fall to the floor with wet thumps. They didn't stop until there were ten blood-soaked corpses cooling on the tiles.

Watis Suggs was the first one to find his voice, and it was full of outrage.

"I know some of these men! Damn it, these are Tarheel Militia! What the hell are they doing in Palmetto uniforms?"

"I recognized a couple of them too," Frank told him, pointing at the bodies. "Those two were with us back when we were both wounded. That's why it surprised me to find them on the hit team trying to slaughter my wife and me in front of our house."

"Renegades!" Suggs hissed in disgust.

"No, just following orders. Hodges?"

An instant later another body joined those on the floor, only this one was very much alive and screaming his lungs out. A charge of buckshot had caught him in the left shoulder and upper arm, and a .357 round had shattered his left leg. Much of the meat on his right arm had been shredded and partly torn away by Thumper's teeth, and his wounds were held together with a tourniquet and purely serviceable bandages whose only purpose was to keep him from bleeding to death before they were done with him. He had also very obviously had the hell beaten out of him within the past few minutes, and was in great pain.

"He and I had a nice little conversation in the Bradley on the way here, and he told us some real interesting things," Hodges remarked casually, even as his hard eyes locked onto the North Carolina Congressman. "Like who he was taking orders from, for instance."

Tarbox blanched, but Suggs' eyes widened with his recognition of former Captain McEvoy. He was suddenly kneeling beside the fallen man.

"Why, McEvoy? Why the hell did you do this?"

"I-it was my orders! I'm loyal to my state!"

Suggs, nearly berserk with rage, grabbed him by the collars and shook him hard, slamming him repeatedly against the tile floor, and McEvoy cried out in fear and pain.

"Whose orders, damn it? Who the hell told you to do this?"

McEvoy looked at Tarbox, who began slipping a hand inside his jacket.

"You go right ahead, boy," Billy's coarse roar echoed through the room as he quickly stepped around the table to make sure he had a clear shot, the whippit gun appearing from under his jacket as if by magic as he kicked a chair out of the way, "and I'll blow your damned nuts right out through your asshole!" The shotgun muzzle pointed directly towards the Congressman's groin. "I'll make you sing soprano! Go ahead, you son of a bitch!" he screamed through tears of grief and anger, "Give me an excuse! *Please!*" Tarbox's hand immediately stopped moving, but the others standing nearby uneasily shifted away from him just in case Frank's bodyguard decided to shoot anyway.

"Lieutenant Drucci," Frank said with remarkable coolness, "disarm and secure Mr. Tarbox."

His dark Italian eyes flashing their hatred, the little Yankee transplant stuffed the still-warm muzzle of his

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MP5 under Tarbox's jaw before reaching inside his jacket and retrieving the Walther .380. Under his breath, he cast aspersions on the Congressman's relationship with his own mother and, like Billy had done, profanely begged him to "give me an excuse!" Then, full of anger and adrenaline from the evening's events, not to mention what Tarbox had done, he suddenly drove his right knee into the Congressman's balls with all the force he could muster. The prisoner doubled over and collapsed in the floor, retching and puking, and Danny, along with one of the other Irregulars, wrenched his arms behind him and slapped on a set of handcuffs far tighter than necessary.

"Mike?" Frank called out.

"We have confirmed that the conversations between the hit team and their leader came from Mr. Tarbox's cell phone."

Suggs actually staggered, and only a quick steadying hand from one of the Texas delegation kept him from stumbling against the table.

"What the hell have you done?"

"I've acted in the best interests of my State!" Tarbox hissed, finding his courage as he recovered his breath enough to get to his knees, despite strings of vomit hanging from his lips, "Edge and all the rest were running this country like a dictatorship!"

"Dictatorship? My God, they've already set the date for the elections! They gave themselves just six years to turn around a hundred and fifty years of history, and then the government would revert back to the States. Can't you understand that? We can't just take off again from 1865!"

"It doesn't matter if it was only six minutes; no centralized government has the right to tell us what to do!"

"If you hate centralized government so much, why the hell did you get in bed with the United States and Mexico? What about Texas and the Southwest?"

"That's Texas' look out! I represent North Carolina, and if we can get good government for ourselves, those others are sacrifices I'm willing to make. Besides, the farmers and businesses in my state have the right to cheap Mexican labor if they want it, without interference from the Central Government!"

Frank had to pound the knucks on the table again for order, and several members of the Southwestern delegation had to be physically restrained by the armed Irregulars stepping in front of them.

"There's another reason," Mike's voice broke in, "and it doesn't have shit to do with his state. Twenty-four hours before the events of this evening, one billion dollars was transferred into Mr. Tarbox's Swiss bank account from an account known to be used by the US Government. It's like a big lottery jackpot; that's evidently the going price for a country nowadays." He paused, and the heard the audible gulp. "On a hunch, we checked back into the older records. Immediately before you, General Suggs, and the rest were ambushed in North Carolina, there was another major transfer into his account, to the sum of ten million dollars, from a CIA cutout. Less than three weeks later, after the ambush failed to kill you, it was transferred back. I think we've finally found our traitor."

Frank didn't even have to look at the irregulars to know what was happening. "Hold your fire!"

"Sir," Hodges began, his voice stretched at tight as a wire garrote, and Drucci was too angry to speak, so enraged that he was shaking and twitching, and audibly grinding his teeth. They were two out of the four men who were the only survivors out of their entire company, thanks to Tarbox's treason.

"No. I'm sorry, but no."

"Frank." It was Suggs' voice. When he looked up, he was startled to see the big, bearded Tarheel actually weeping, tears pouring down his weathered, scarred cheeks to disappear into the thick, black bush of his beard.

"Yeah, Watis?"

"After what he did, and the way he shamed my State...I know I have no right to ask you anything…"

"You and I stood shoulder to shoulder and bled together on that mountaintop. You were responsible for providing the men to save my people, and the doctor who saved my life and brought my little girl into this world. You're also my friend. You've got the right to ask me any damned thing you want!"

"Please. It was North Carolina he disgraced; please let me redeem at least little bit of my State's honor."

Frank nodded curtly, and Watis, ignoring the tensing of the Irregulars, drew his own pistol, a Smith and

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Wesson Model 29 .44 magnum. While Tarbox stammered, he raised it and pointed it at Congressman's head. Tarbox's eyes widened at the sight of the hungry mouths of the big hollow-nosed slugs peeking out at him from the chambers.

"Samantha was right that day she pistol whipped you; you are a damned cowardly son of a bitch!"

"No!" Mike shouted from the screen. "General Suggs, we need to find out what he knows so we can round up the rest of them!"

Pistol never wavering, Watis growled, "Do you think he'll actually tell you anything?"

Mike's voice was cold, and even on the screen, his eyes were nothing less than predatory.

"Oh yes; I guarantee it. You see, the best friend I'd ever had in my life was sitting in Frank's chair when that bomb went off right under his feet." He paused and his face twisted with grief and fury until it looked like nothing even remotely human. "Tommy Richardson and I had been friends since junior high school. Donna used to bake cookies for me. If that weren't enough, both of them were tortured and raped, and the woman I loved died as a result of his actions in setting up that massacre in North Carolina. I guarantee this sorry sack of shit will beg to be *allowed* to tell me what I want to know before my intelligence people are done with him!"

Tarbox paled and vomited again.

The militia leader nodded and slowly walked around the table to the fallen McEvoy.

"Do you need him for anything else, General?"

Frank looked at Hodges, who shrugged.

"I promised not to kill him if he told us what we needed to know."

Suggs raised his pistol.

"North Carolina didn't promise the treacherous son of a bitch anything. I should have done this a long time ago," he said, and looked right into the man's eyes when he squeezed the trigger, blowing McEvoy's brains all over the floor, and spattering the surrounding men's pants legs with a stinging spray of blood, chips of bone, and globs of brain matter.

Frank nodded at Hodges even before the ear-splitting echo had faded out.

"Secure the prisoner, and send him with a detail down to intelligence." He paused. "I need him to arrive *alive*, gentlemen, able to talk and not in need of hospitalization, because I don't have time to wait until he's well."

Watching Tarbox being yanked to his feet and un-gently frog-marched out, Watis sighed. Turning to Frank, he offered his pistol, butt first.

"I apologize for the treasonous actions of my State, sir, and place myself under arrest."

"Keep you pistol, Watis; you'll need it again before this is done. It's not only elements in your State that were involved. This is a cross-Confederacy conspiracy, with its stinking fingers in every state, no doubt including mine."

"As much as I hate to admit it, you've got that right," Boggess' image came to them out of the speakers."

"Sit down, all of you," Frank told them, "We need to talk."

They did, ignoring the mangled bodies on the floor and the stink rising from them as best they could.

"Gentlemen, as far as we're able to determine at this time, we only have two surviving Congressmen left alive, and only one we can reach at the moment – Mr. Boggess. The senior members of the rest of state contingents all are going to have to act as the Congress for the time being. Constitutional or not, it's all we've got and we're going to go with it."

There were nods and quiet murmurs of assent all around.

"I won't lie to you men; there will be no propaganda within these chambers. We are in for a fight for our lives, and the odds are stacked against us. We're a young country, facing an enemy almost as large as we are with an established military infrastructure, not to mention the uncertainty regarding the possible actions of our much more powerful enemy to the north. We'll have to split our forces to deal with both.

"We have a chance of winning, but only a chance. Jonathon Edge, God rest his soul, foresaw this and he was a soldier who knew what he was doing. He and I war-gamed this same scenario several times, and developed a response. I know what he would have done, because he told me in detail.

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"You know I never wanted any position of power, either within the movement or within the government, but you also know I've always done what I had to do, regardless of what the situation demanded. The Confederacy needs a strong hand now more than ever. There's too much at stake to run this war by discussions and committees; one man needs to be in charge, especially now that nearly all our leadership is dead. I don't think I'm bragging when I say that I am the one with the best chance of leading us to victory, if for no other reason than I already know the plan to deal with it.

"You do realize what you're asking us to do, Frank?" Jim asked him quietly.

"Yeah, I realize it. There's something else, too. In order to win this conflict – to survive - there are going to have to be some things done, both here and in Mexico that are not going to be pretty. Some of them are going to be in violation of much of what we hold dear, not to mention international law, but we've got to do them anyway if we want our people to live. I didn't come this far and shed this much blood during the Revolution to give up now, no matter what the cost! Rest assured, there will be a cost; the person who does this will never be able to go abroad without facing arrest as an international war criminal, and many of our own people will hate his guts by the time this is over. A man like that can't build a conventional government, or take any part in it. For him it's over – finished. For the sake of our people, this has to be done, but it's best if only one man has to be the scapegoat. You all will take the reins again, after the election if not before, and you can do it with clean hands in the eyes of the people and the world. Whatever I do, the blame for it will leave with me as the last of the old order, and rest assured, I will leave; you have my word on that. I have no desire to stay."

The room was silent. Several of the men couldn't bring themselves to meet his eyes. Finally, Jack Bogess' voice broke the stillness.

"As the senior surviving Congressman present, I would like to make a motion."

All eyes turned toward the West Virginian's image.

"This war isn't a matter for debate; it's already here, and we don't have the time; every second counts in Southern lives right now. Frank is right. Like it or not, this can't be run by committee. We only have one man still living amongst us who's capable of inspiring the people to win, and that's Frank Gore. It's the same afterwards, as we knock down a hundred and fifty years of brainwashing and change this country to the way it ought to be – the way it has to be! We all know there are things that need to be done here that the Congress hasn't had and never will have either the guts or the public support to do; now's our chance to get them done. I wouldn't trust another man to lay down this kind of power – certainly not President Edge or Vice President MacFie, God rest their souls, and maybe not even myself – but I trust this man! He had the power in his hands once before and he laid it down then, and I have no doubt he'll do it again."

"What do you mean?" several voices demanded, and Jack proceeded to tell them the story, previously known to only a handful of people, of how Frank took control of the Council in the early days of the war when it was torn by an internal coup attempt, and then returned that power to its rightful place once he did what needed to be done. They all looked at him, eyes widening with new respect.

"I know his word is good, and I know the depth of what he's offering up; not just his life and fortune, both of which he's put on the line more times than all of us put together. He is, very literally, offering up his sacred honor and his good name for the Confederacy. Besides all that, we simply don't have time for anything else. Therefore, I move that the Congress approve full, unlimited emergency powers to Secretary of Defense Gore and appoint him Acting President until such a time as we decide to revoke it by a two-thirds majority, or until the scheduled election, whichever comes first."

"I second the motion!" Watis Suggs roared, "Right now, we need a leader, and we need this one! All in favor?"

The yeas were deafening.

"Nays?"

The room was dead silent.

"The Congress has made its decision," Jack told him. "You're the only one in this whole shootin' match we all trust, Frank – Mr. President. You're the only one who has a chance of saving our nation. You do what you have to do, and we'll support you."

"Thank you, Jack, all of you. For right now, though, I need two things from you all. First, you need to corral

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the traitors in our ranks ASAP – preferably tonight, before they have the chance to get away. Each of you is responsible for your own states; do it however you see fit, bearing in mind that the Confederate Intelligence Service is to have any and all information you gather in the process."

He knew from experience and from the grim looks on their faces that the said process would be a short and brutal one, that few of those on the lists would be taken alive, and that those who were would probably come to wish otherwise. He shrugged; somehow, he could find no pity for them after what they had done, and he didn't worry about the consequences to himself, even though it would be done in his name.

"Secondly, I need you all to stand with me; I'm getting ready to make a speech in just a few minutes."

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CHAPTER 52

Japan's Ambassador to the Confederate States of America, Nobuo Hiro, was more than a little angry, although it was at fate itself rather than anyone in particular. He wondered what wrong he had done in a past life to deserve this evening.

He and his wife were expected at the first Independence Day celebration in Columbia; every diplomat he knew of had either gotten an invitation, or begged or bought one, and his had come personally from President Edge himself. Besides, he had loved festivals of any kind since he was a child in Japan, and he had been really looking forward to this.

Less than five miles outside Columbia, their limousine had made a horrible coughing noise, and then the engine had clanked and sputtered and abruptly quit. Now he would miss the event, and suffer a substantial amount of embarrassment in the process, possibly even offending the Confederates to the point that it could conceivably affect the growing relationship between the countries. Hiro was so frustrated he felt like smashing something.

Sensing his mood, his wife put a gentle hand on his forearm, and, as always, her contact seemed to drain his anger away. He looked at her and smiled; not hard to do, since she was very beautiful, with her pale skin, soft brown almond eyes and a small, delicate nose. More importantly, she was a good wife, traditional-minded while at the same time loving and caring; it was obvious that her husband was the focus of her life.

Hiro smiled at her and patted her fine-boned hand before leaning his head out the window of the embassy limo and asked the chauffeur, "Well?"

Hatsumi looked up from under the hood and shook his head.

"I am sorry, Hiro-san; the motor is blown."

"Blown?"

"Yes sir, the engine block itself is cracked; there's oil leaking down the side. If you wish, I'll call for a tow truck, sir."

Blowing out his breath, Hiro nodded before leaning back in his seat. He knew very little about cars, but he knew this one wasn't going anywhere.

Hatsumi had just pulled his cell phone out of its holster when he saw headlights coming his way. Unlike his boss, the chauffeur was very much a car aficionado, and immediately recognized the oncoming lights as those of a military Humvee. He knew that the Southern soldiers could always be counted on to be courteous and helpful, and it would definitely make him some much-needed brownie points if he could catch the ambassador and his wife a ride, even in a rough military vehicle.

Stepping out into the road, he began waving his arms, motioning for them to stop.

In the passenger seat of the Humvee, Mexican Commando Captain Hector Gonzales frowned at the uniformed man blocking the road. Taking in the peaked cap and the shiny buttons, he assumed at first that he was some sort of local police officer until he saw the stopped limo. Motioning the driver to slow down, Gonzales stuck his head out the window.

"Get the hell out of the road! This is a military vehicle!"

Through the limo's open window, Hiro frowned as he clearly heard the voice and its accent: one that had nothing at all to do with South Carolina.

Something is wrong here!

As for the chauffeur, he wasn't interested in taking 'no' for an answer.

"Please! I have the Japanese Ambassador with me. He needs to join his friends in Columbia for the celebration!"

Gonzales' lip curled. The Japanese were friends with the Confederates, the occupiers of Aztlan, and if he wanted to join them, so be it.

Hatsumi was still talking when the burst of sub-machinegun fire stitched him up the centerline from groin to head, wiping the smile of his face and taking almost half of that face along with it. His legs buckled and he fell

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forward with a limp wet thump.

More rounds went reaching for the limousine, raking back and forth across it repeatedly and, amidst the clanging of punctured metal and the shattering of glass that filled the passenger compartment, Ambassador Hiro desperately threw himself across his wife and shoved her into the floorboard. Two rounds hammered into his right middle back and right shoulder, and a third skidded along the right side of his skull, splitting his scalp and making his head recoil into an armrest. His vision exploded into stars and darkness, and lost consciousness for a few seconds.

Knowing the gunfire might attract attention, Gonzales gave the order and the Humvee moved out once more, Hatsumi's body making a noticeable bump when the tires passed over it.

The tail lights weren't even out of sight when Hiro awoke to the sounds of his wife moaning and gasping for breath, and it was a horrible gurgling noise, not unlike the coffee maker in his office.

Phone conversation, Mexico

"*Sir! The Americans have reneged on their agreement! They've recalled their planes…they've done nothing!"*

"*What? Those cowards!"*

"*El Presidente, we have to withdraw…"*

"*We withdraw nothing, do you hear? Nothing!"*

"*But…"*

"*No! We've already attacked them, General. We have poked this jaguar with a stick, and there is no going back now. Our only chance is to drive ahead with the Reconquista, and take all we can get. Then we hold it until the UN steps in with peacekeepers. By that time we will have cleansed Aztlan of the gringos, and it will be ours once more. We can still win if we continue with the plan!"*

"*I wonder if the army of Cuban exiles thought the same thing during the Bay of Pigs."*

"*That will be all, General! You must keep your troops on the attack, moving forward at any cost. We have come too far to stop, and attack is our only chance. Do you understand?"*

"*Si, El Presidente."*

"*Then see to it; it's time for my speech."*

General Morales put the phone down. He would do his duty, of course, but he had a very, *very* bad feeling about this.

"General Gore…um, I mean President Gore…"

"Go ahead," he told the phone receiver, not much caring what his men or anyone else called him at that moment.

"Sir, I have a Reverend Jason Jenkins out here who says you'll want to see him."

Frank turned grateful eyes up toward the ceiling, seeking something far beyond it.

Thank you, God!

"Absolutely; please send him in, and notify the rest of the unit to pass him through directly to me."

It was barely a minute later that the man affectionately known across the South as "Reverend Jase" came panting through the door, out of breath from running.

Reverend Jason wasn't much to look at; White and bald, short and stocky, almost as broad as he was tall, but the homely sixty-four year-old preacher was a rising star throughout the South. Besides his own church that he had inherited from the late Reverend Gibson, murdered in a Federal interrogation center, he was the number one preacher on the CSA Public Communications Network with both TV and radio broadcasts. Most of the competition was gone, since nearly all the largest mainstream media pastors had supported the United States during the recent conflict and Israel after the incident in Russia, and had been exiled for it. Through an open but deliberately unannounced sale by the new government he supported, his organization had managed to pick up nearly all the mega-church properties at fire sale prices, and their congregations along with them. He

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and his predecessor had been among the few to back the Third Revolution from the beginning, so the charismatic little man had been a natural to place as the official chaplain to the Confederate Congress. As if that weren't enough, using his new found influence, he immediately set about forming the Southern Council of Churches under the traditional Biblical doctrine, universal among Catholics and Protestants alike before the mid-19th Century – that all Christians were God's chosen people, the children of Abraham, and spiritual Israel, and as such they owed allegiance to their Christian nation – in this case the Confederacy – as long as that nation supported Christianity. Since many Southerners were disillusioned with Israel after it directly aided the United States in its attempted subjugation of the South and attempt on Frank Gore's life, and many of those who supported an Israel-first policy were gone, and the majority of church members, as always, were content to accept whatever whoever was in the pulpit told them, the doctrine took hold much easier than anyone would have thought. It became a uniting, rather than dividing force that crossed some pretty broad denominational lines. Many churches flocked to him, sometimes leaders first but most often the ordinary parishioners were the ones leading the way, either dragging their leaders with them or leaving them behind with empty pews.

Frank saw that the preacher was filthy, battered and flecked with drying blood. A large, bloody gauze pad was taped to his forehead, signifying that he had evidently been one of the lucky ones around the fringes of the blast. Despite his own wounds, he had thrown himself bodily into the rescue effort, and had only left when he heard what had happened with the Gores, and that they were still alive.

"Frank, I was helping out at the site when I heard. I'm so very sorry!"

"I appreciate that."

His gnarled face exuded concern.

"Are you okay?"

"No, I'm not okay. I'm not okay at all, but I've got to keep it together; they're all depending on me now. If I fall apart, everything we've built and bled for falls apart with me. I don't have that luxury." He gulped hard. "Please pray for me, Jase. I-I can't even cry for my own baby girl!"

The preacher abruptly hugged him and patted his back.

"You know I will. How's Samantha holding up?"

Frank hung his head, the guilt about not being able to be with her now, of all times, weighing him down.

"I don't know. I've been trying to pull everyone together and haven't even had the time to comfort her since we got here. In God's name, I don't know what I'm going to do!"

Reverend Jase looked him calmly and directly in the eyes.

"We both know exactly what you're going to do. You're going to keep doing what you have to do; just what you've been doing, and for as long as you need to do it. Like General JEB. Stuart when he lost his own daughter and couldn't go to her or to his wife, you have your duty, and God will give you the strength to do it.

"I admire you, Frank. I don't envy you – would that God would strike me dead before He saw fit to put me through what you're going through – but I admire you. You're a man among men, and I'm certain that God has use for you. Now let's say a quick prayer, and then I'll go see your wife."

Before either of them could bow their heads, there came a quick, urgent knocking at the door. Frank, sighed, turned his head toward it and said, "Come."

"Sir!" It was Danny Drucci, almost shouting with excitement. "Mike is calling for you; the Mexican President just began his speech!"

It was everything the preacher could do not to step back from Frank when he saw the look that instantly took over his face: eyes wild, glittering, and focused with an impossible tightness, and teeth showing in fierce anticipation.

"You'll have to pray for both of us; I've got work to do!"

He was instantly out the door in thunder of boots, shouting orders, and leaving his guest standing there. Reverend Jase looked after him for a moment, then bowed his head and recited the words of the Psalm that suddenly came to him.

"Blessed be the Lord my strength, which teacheth my hands to war, and my fingers to fight…"

It was the only thing appropriate he could think of; doubly appropriate, since this had become an Old

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Testament war, one without forgiveness, without mercy, and one where the winner would be the one who lived through it.

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CHAPTER 53

"*The time has come, my friends and my countrymen. The time has come for Mexico to rise to its former glory once again!*

"*Aztlan, the land to the north, was stolen from us! Our people are forbidden to live there, to even go there, and those who do are mistreated, imprisoned, sometimes even killed! We will no longer tolerate this!*

"*It is time for the Reconquista, the time when we take back that which is ours, and make no mistake, it is ours, and we will have what is coming to us!*

The Mexican President's speech was coming over the speakers, and each and every word fueled both men's anger.

"Where is he, Mike?"

The Intelligence Chief never looked up from his computer as his friend leaned over his shoulder, with one hand on the back of his chair and the other on his desk. Frank still wore the same expression the preacher had seen, and Mike's mirrored it. He pointed to the screen at the image of President Lopez behind a podium, a broad, triumphant smile on his face. The image was gesturing, pointing an index finger north while speaking rapidly in Spanish.

"He's in Monterrey, at the capital building."

"How far away are the bombers?"

"I've got one less than two minutes out; I guessed where he was heading from the GPS data, and already had it over the border and heading in that direction in anticipation."

"Good job! Can you patch me through? I'd like to give the order myself."

Mike nodded his understanding.

I was hoping to be the one, but he's lost more than I have; it's his right.

"Just a minute…done." He extended the headset, and Frank took it and slipped it on.

"This is General Gore."

"*Sir, this is Colonel Corry. My condolences, sir."*

"Thank you. Are you in position?"

"*One minute until target, sir; awaiting final authorization."*

"You have it. Make sure you aim true, Colonel."

"*I'll put it right in his back pocket, sir."*

"Right on top of his head would be better. It's payback time, and it's all up to you."

"*I won't let you down, sir. Commencing final approach."*

At almost 50,000 feet, the B2 Spirit bomber began releasing its load. Fifty JDAM – Joint Directed Attack Munition – Mark 82 bombs, each one weighing nearly five hundred pounds, went falling to earth. Each was guided by its tail, controlled by a sophisticated GPS internal navigation system, capable of landing it within ten meters of its target, in this case the capitol of Nuevo Leon, namely the Palacio de Gobierno and President Vincente Lopez. Twenty-five thousand pounds of explosive ordnance might have been overkill, but it was a sure kill, and that was what was important. There was a point to be made, and a lesson to be taught.

There was a series of massive explosions merging into one loud, deafening roar like a dozen jackhammers wielded by giants as the Mark 82s sought out their target. Choking smoke billowed in a great cloud that covered much of Monterrey and it was several minutes before it was clear enough to even begin to see. The collapsing of nearby utility poles and the shorting out of transformers had taken down most of the city's power, and the panic was so great that it took a long time for emergency crews to force their way through the crowds. Once they arrived, their mouths hung open in awestruck horror; the entire Palacio de Gobierno and everyone in it had been pounded into the earth.

While they watched Lopez's image instantly go to static, Corry's voice came back.

"*Direct hit, sir.*

Imagining the carnage they had just unleashed, Mike muttered, "Paybacks are hell!"

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Frank nodded, trying to feel something inside himself besides pain and anger, and found little else but an increased desire to do even more. The rage within him was not dampened, but seemed to grow exponentially, feeding off the conflagration. Some tiny, distant part of him stood aghast, but right now it couldn't speak loud enough to be heard, let alone understood. What he understood was that his own daughter was dead, his friends were dead, and thousands of his people were dead, and the retribution for their lives had barely begun. He understood that the old locket against his chest seemed to vibrate, throbbing against his skin as if his ancestors were shouting their acclamation, silently screaming the ancient battle cries of his people across misty seas of time.

"Thank you, Colonel, for both Dixie and for me. You've done us proud. You have more assigned targets?"

"*Yes sir."*

"Then go and give them *hell*!"

"*Yes sir! You can count on it!"*

As he took off the headset, Mike looked at him.

"Did that help?"

Frank shook his head.

"Help kill the pain? No, but it damned sure made it easier to live with!"

"Amen to that!" Mike said, then added, "I want it to be a whole hell of a lot easier to live with before we're through!"

The General's hand clamped down tightly on his.

"Don't worry; it will be...for us."

He fully believed the words he spoke, but inside a tiny part of him wasn't quite so sure. The voice was so small he couldn't hear it, and after what had happened, it would have made no difference anyway. As Reverend Jase had said, he had is duty; his duty to his people, his duty to his fallen friends, and his duty to his daughter he would never hold in his arms again. This was more than war; it was a blood feud, a concept so deeply ingrained that the Southerner understood it more in his soul than in his head, and before he was through the world would see just how seriously he took his duty to that blood.

Lieutenant Doug Long gave the order, but stopped the Bradley well away from the bloody, kneeling man in the middle of the road in case of a trap. The man dropped his arms, as if he didn't have the strength to hold them aloft anymore. Suddenly, one of the men pointed to the plate on the front of the car.

"Look, sir, he's a diplomat."

"Good Lord, I know who that is! I've seen him with Frank; that's Mr. Hiro, the Japanese Ambassador!

"All right," Long said into the radio, "secure this area! Set up a perimeter and get a medic on him ASAP! Keep your eyes open!"

Men began leaping out as other vehicles roared past, and still others turned and faced the opposite direction, guns pointed back the way they had come. Meanwhile, the squad medics ran to the ambassador's side. They cast a passing glance at the limo driver, but his crushed body and the gaping hole in his head said loud and clear that he was beyond their help. They had no time to waste on the dead, if they wanted to have a chance of saving the living.

"My wife," Hiro gasped, waving at the shot up car, "Please help my wife!"

As one of the medics ran to the vehicle to work on her, Long took him by the shoulder.

"Who did this, sir?"

"Men...in uniforms like yours!" He paused, gasping as another wave of pain shot through him. "Only...they were dark-skinned and spoke with a strong Hispanic accent."

The Lieutenant frowned. "Mexicans in Palmetto militia uniforms, with berets like mine?" he asked, pointing at the crest on his hat, and Hiro nodded.

"Yes, and driving one of your military vehicles – Humvees, I think you call them – with a palm tree insignia on the side"

Doug Long's face darkened with anger, and he asked the classic question, "Which way did they go?"

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Lieutenant Casey Graham was extremely pissed off, and, with a personality like his, that was a very dangerous state of affairs. Worse, the feeling had been grown throughout the whole evening. First he was pissed that Hodges had assigned him to security detail in the middle of nowhere, so he had missed the celebration. Then, he had been really pissed when he heard about the bomb blast. The only good thing that had happened tonight was that Frank and Samantha, at least, were still alive, but just about everyone else was dead, if the news was to be believed, and Mexico, and possibly the United States, had just invaded.

His strange eyes seeming to glow from the fire inside, he ground his teeth together in frustration. He was in just the right mood to deliver a world-class fatal ass-kicking to somebody, and, at the moment, he didn't much care who.

Damn it, I want to kill something!

The Palmetto militiamen under his command weren't any less angry, but they still watched their commander carefully. Even before the war, Graham had been rightly pegged as a borderline psycho, and the subsequent events during the conflict tended to strengthen that opinion: an opinion Casey Graham had never tried to discourage. He was not a sadist, but a warrior. He was a fighter by nature, and a damned good one, and, like his Irish forbearers, he saw no reason to deny it, or the battle madness that was his legacy. He was what he was, and he was comfortable with it.

"Palmetto uniforms?" he inquired into the radio, "Are you sure?"

"That's the report we got from Ambassador Hiro, Casey. He says they were driving a Humvee with our insignia when they shot up him and his party, and they're headed in your direction."

"Are any more of our people in the neighborhood?"

"Just your unit and mine; any other vehicle with Palmetto insignia coming down this road is a clear target."

"Thanks, Doug. Out."

When he turned to his men, they knew from his snarling smile that something was about to happen.

"Boys, I think we've got some of the ones who set off that bomb in Columbia headed our way. To top it off, they're evidently Mexican commandos, disguised in our State uniforms. You ready for some payback?"

A roar of approbation filled the Bradley, and Casey was pleased to see his own ferocious anticipation mirrored back at him from every pair of glaring eyes and every set of bared teeth. Some sorry son of a bitch was about to be a whole lot sorrier.

The Palmetto Militiamen backed away from the military Med/Evac chopper as it came in just above the treetops and set down on the asphalt road, making the tall grass alongside surge like ocean waves until the pilot cut the engine. The flares that marked the clear landing spot gave everything a hellish red glow.

"It'll be all right, Mr. Hiro," Doug Long was telling the Ambassador as they strapped him on the backboard in preparation for loading him. "They're taking you to the Charleston Naval Base. Our medics say your wife is stabilized, and they've got some good surgeons down there. In the middle of the base, you'll also be safe." He shook his head slightly. "There's nothing we can do for your chauffeur, but we'll bring him back to Columbia with us, and get someone to make the arrangements to send his body back home."

"Thank you," Hiro gasped, weak from shock and blood loss. The whole world seemed to be spinning, and Long patted his hand.

"Like I said, everything will be all right..." His voice trailed off and he cocked his head, listening to a distant roar echoing from miles away, and his teeth bared in a smile that had nothing at all to do with humor. "Hear that, Mr. Hiro? Hear it?" Hiro nodded and Long went on with savage glee. "That's a Bradley 20mm automatic cannon or I'll kiss your ass! Casey is over that way, and, from the sound of it, I'd say those bastards who attacked you just ran into their worst freaking nightmare!"

Upon hearing the words, Hiro's hand twisted and clamped down on the Confederate's fingers with a lot more force than Long would have thought the slender, wounded man could muster.

"Thank you!" he said again, this time with a fierce tone of satisfaction. "I will not forget!"

As he watched them load the Japanese couple inside and close the door, he looked up at the starry sky, as if seeking answers to the questions he didn't know how to ask.

"I don't think anyone will ever forget tonight," he said to himself, since there was no one else close enough

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to hear over the roar of the chopper as it rose high enough to clear the trees before banking to starboard and disappearing.

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CHAPTER 54

US News Bulletin

This just in; the White House has reported that President Plants has died unexpectedly aboard Air Force One this evening while monitoring the crisis to the south. His physician, present at the time, said the President appeared to have had a massive heart attack, and was pronounced dead despite the heroic rescue efforts of his personal medical team.

Former Vice President Roberts has assumed the Presidency in accordance with the law, and is expected to deliver a speech shortly. Sources close to him, who spoke on the condition of anonymity, indicate that he will assure the American people that their government had nothing to do with the conflict between Mexico and the Confederacy, and, beyond securing our own borders, will not become involved in it, instead adopting a policy of strict neutrality. He is also expected to call for both sides to implement an immediately cease-fire...

A Bradley fighting vehicle began forcing its way through the crowd of reporters and spectators still gathered in front of the Confederate Building. They parted reluctantly before it, but, oddly enough, seemed to be in no hurry to close again behind it. Instead, they remained parted like grass bordering a trodden pathway.

Hodges, alerted by the guard outside that someone was coming, stood on the steps, staring until he caught sight of the taught rope stretched out behind the vehicle. Following it back with his gaze, his eyes widened at what was at the end of it. A number of mangled bodies were tied to it by their feet, dragging along like a stringer of fish, and they had left a broad slug trail of blood and bits behind them, looking black in the near darkness. They had been so shot up they had barely held together when they had been roped up twenty minutes and several miles ago, and now they were definitely worse for the wear.

The grim parade stopped, the commander's hatch popped open, and Casey Graham climbed out on top of the fighting vehicle, his eyes wide and crazy. He pointed at the mess behind them, and shouted, "Take a good look! There are the Spic shit-skinned sons of bitches who set off the bomb!"

Someone in the crowd clapped, and someone else took it up, and then several someones. Within a few seconds, it sounded like the roar of thunder.

Hodges nodded his approval, then went to let Frank know what was going on.

Staring at Graham standing before his desk, with several of the Irregular officers, Frank shook his head.

"You definitely made an entrance."

"Yes sir, I reckon I did," the lieutenant calmly replied, his eyes still glittering with anger that had yet to be quenched.

"Why did you do that?"

"They were already dead, so they couldn't feel it." After a moment, he added, "Too damned bad, too!"

The tone of his voice made it very clear his disappointment was sincere.

"Why did you have to drag them? They're not trophies."

"No sir, they're not trophies; they're spies and murderers, who did their dirty work in *our* uniforms! They're *shit*, and I won't load shit in *my* vehicles with *my* men! Sir."

Frank tapped the desk in thought, and then smiled...more or less. It was the same sort of look Graham often saw in the mirror.

"I trusted you with the responsibility of a lieutenant's rank. Apparently, I was wrong. Attention!"

Casey Graham straightened, and shook with anger as Frank calmly stepped forward and removed the silver bars from his collar, but the anger turned to curiosity when he began pinning on something else.

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"Congratulations, Colonel Graham; you're going to be leading Dixie's militia forces against Mexico." He saluted, and the newly promoted officer saluted back, blinking his eyes that had suddenly begun to blur for some reason. "Take Steiner with you; he's your new XO. Now, start organizing your force and report to General Lannigan; he'll put you where he needs you. I want you and your people to be ready to go by no later than o-nine-hundred hours tomorrow; do South Carolina proud. But first, get back out there and clean up your mess; nobody leaves shit lying in the street in front of my capital!"

"Yes sir!" Casey managed, then turned and ran for the door, eager to obey.

"Major Harrison."

"Sir!"

"You are hereby promoted to Colonel, effective immediately." He shook his head. "I don't have the insignia at the moment, but I'll get them to you. Give Doug Long your oak leaves; he's going to be your second in command. You are now in charge of the domestic operations of the South Carolina Militia, and the security of this State. You will report directly to acting governor Carter, see to the security of our borders, and root out any and all traitors we have here, starting right now!"

Harrison took him at his word. Still in shock, he managed a, "Thank you, sir," and a quick salute before heading out the door, wondering where the hell to start first.

Frank turned to Hodges, who was fuming, even though he never let it show on his square-jawed face. Even in his own grief and rage, Frank had empathy for him, and knew the man felt passed over, as if his unquestionable loyalty had been betrayed.

"Graham is a good soldier, but he's also more than a little psychotic; he's collateral damage waiting to happen. When that happens, I want it to be in Mexico, where it will do the most good, not in South Carolina or anywhere else on Confederate soil. Harrison can handle South Carolina; he's reliable and more of a people person.

"I've got another job for you; a job that needs both a reliable and violent man, not simply a violent one. Attention!"

Hodges instinctively obeyed, and it was his turn to be surprised when Frank pulled two stars from his own collars and pinned them on him.

"General Hodges, give your birds to Drucci; he's your XO. As of this moment, you are in Chief of Security for the Government of the Confederate States of America, or what's left of it. I can't fight this war and watch my back at the same time, so I'm counting on you to do that so I don't have to think about it. As of now, you are in full charge of keeping us alive. See to it, coordinate with Mike and the others, do whatever you've got to do, and keep me posted."

Frank saluted, spun on his heel, and walked away, and it took Hodges several shocked seconds to manage to return the salute, but by that time, it was to an empty room. He grinned like an idiot for almost a minute, until the awesome responsibility of what his commander and friend had just dumped in his lap suddenly came crashing down upon him, and he was out the door shouting for Danny Drucci.

Ambassador Hiro lay on the gurney, still sluggishly bleeding around his bandages, but calmly speaking Japanese into the phone provided him by the Naval Hospital. Asami was already in surgery, but Hiro had refused to be put under until he spoke to his higher-ups at home. He had his duty, after all, and he took it seriously.

"Yes sir...I was in a plainly marked diplomatic limousine...yes sir, they only opened fire *after* I was identified by the chauffer...yes sir, I am positive; they were dark-skinned and spoke English with a heavy Spanish accent...no sir, there was no possibility of a mistake; one of them referred to me as a 'slant-eyed Japanese asshole,' and said that this was the price for associating with the Confederates...yes sir, I am certain...they think she will live; thank you...yes, sir, I will. Goodbye, sir."

Hiro tried to hang up the phone, bumped it against his IV cord, and ended up dropping the receiver. Unwilling to appear weak by leaving it there, he managed to snag the cord, and then reeled it in and replaced it before pushing the nurse's call button. He knew the nurse must have been waiting impatiently just outside his door, because he hadn't gotten his thumb off the switch before the panel opened and she marched in, followed

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by an aide.

"Are you ready to go to surgery now, sir?" the stout woman asked, scrupulously polite even while giving the impression that he was going whether he was ready or not.

"Yes, thank you. How is my wife?"

"She's still in surgery."

"I...see," he managed as the orderlies grabbed the bed and began rolling it towards the door while she brought up the rear.

Picking up the catch in his voice, she smiled tightly and, once they were in the hallway and could get beside him, she patted his hand.

"We've got good doctors here, Mr. Hiro, and I can promise you they'll give her their very best."

As they wheeled him briskly along, the passing parade of regularly spaced fluorescent lights on the white ceiling seemed hypnotic, giving him a sense of unreality.

"I just..." He shook his head, refusing to give into the weakness that threatened to come pouring out. "Thank you."

"I know, honey," she said, giving his hand a comforting squeeze, "but you're going to have to let us worry about her for awhile; right now, you need to worry about you." She paused for a moment, and then continued. "I'm sorry this had to happen to you in our country."

Hiro simply nodded this time, keeping his thoughts to himself like a good diplomat. Instead of Asami or himself, his thoughts had shifted to the tone of voice of his boss, and to what he knew of the current Japanese Administration, with its renewed sense of nationalistic pride.

She's not nearly as sorry as the bastards who did this are going to be!

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CHAPTER 55

Frank stood on the steps of the Confederate Building and looked out over the sea of reporters and the concerned of the citizens of Columbia, kept back by the barricades, and by a fierce looking line of Irregulars, bristling with automatic weapons. Many of the people were filthy, having been assisting with the rescue work, and not a few carried minor wounds themselves, having been caught on the fringes of the blast, but they had stayed to help those who weren't that fortunate. Despite the pressing need and police orders to the contrary, thousands had left temporarily, and walked the few blocks to hear what he had to say. They needed something – anything – to hang onto, to keep them going, to reassure them that everything wasn't falling apart around them, and to give them a direction.

Frank shook his head. He didn't want to do this, but he was in charge, so he had no choice. The South needed a leader right now, and he was it.

"Just a few hours ago, an attack was launched here in Columbia against the Confederate States of America. In collusion with the United States CIA and, I'm ashamed to say, a faction of traitors within our own ranks led by Congressman Tarbox, Zedo commandos from the Mexican armed forces detonated a bomb blast that has destroyed most of our government. Only two Congressman – Jack Boggess from West Virginia and TJ Ashby of Louisiana – are known to have survived at this point, and Jack barely escaped an assassination attempt at his own home. President Edge and Vice President MacFie, along with all the others, are missing and presumed dead. Also missing and presumed dead are my friends, Tommy Richardson, Donna Waddell, Congressman Sam Wirtz…and my little girl, Linda, who was with them."

He stopped and swallowed hard, forced to put his hand over his mouth for a moment, pulling at his face and looking away to stifle the primal scream of grief that threatened to force its way out. There was silence except for muttered exclamations and the first sobbing from some of the crowd as several people, men and women both, cried unashamedly.

"Immediately following the blast that rocked this city," he continued, as soon as he recovered his voice, "Mexico invaded, launching an attack across the borders of Arizona, New Mexico, and Texas, as well as the southernmost territories of our Indian allies in the CNAN. They are now well inside our borders, and there are reports already coming in of mass looting, raping, and the shooting of our civilians. If the reports are true, they are shooting every male over the age of puberty, and what is happening to the women and, often as not, the children, is much, much worse. It is an orgy of mass torture and rape unseen in modern times."

Momentarily stunned, the people found their voice again in a roar of rage that grew like a torrent of floodwater.

"We have already begun the first stages of a counterattack," he shouted in order to be heard above the angry crowd, "not only upon the Mexican troops within our borders, but upon Mexico itself. Our intelligence sources located the Mexican President in Monterrey, and pinpointed him for our bombers; although it has not been confirmed as of yet, we believe we killed him, along with everyone else with him." He had to wait until the cheering slacked off before continuing. "By the time we are through, we will demonstrate that no one attacks our country and butchers our people with impunity – *no one*!"

"How do you intend to deal with Mexico?" one of the nearer reporters shouted abruptly when the noise died down enough that he could be heard.

Frank glared at him coldly, then reached into his pocket and withdrew his brass knuckles, slipping them over his fingers while the crowd watched.

"I've got something for Mexico!" he declared, raising his armored fist high. As he continued, his voice rose in volume with every word. "The gloves are off! Our vengeance rides on the nosecone of every Southern missile, the tip of every Southern bullet, and the edge of every piece of Southern steel! They wanted a fight and we're going to give it to them right up to the hilt! We will do more than just defend our land and our people! Their blood cries out to us from the ground, and we will not stop until we avenge that blood a thousand-fold!"

It took almost a minute before the cheering died away so he could be heard.

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"Due to this emergency, as the highest ranking surviving member of the cabinet, I have, with the unanimous approval of the surviving members of the Congressional delegations and Congressman Boggess, assumed the presidency, with full emergency powers. I am now in command. We never sought war, but war has come to us nonetheless. We will meet it head on, and by God, we will not stop until the enemy is not just defeated, but utterly crushed!" There were more cheers at this revelation.

"We have already began bombing, and as I said, we believe we have killed the President of Mexico, Vincente Lopez, one of the primary instigators behind this act of terror." He was forced to wait a moment until the roar of approval died down. "The Southwestern State militias, as well as the Confederate Marines and Sailors in the area, are putting up a ferocious resistance, and more will be coming; however, it is not enough. Our naval forces are steaming at full speed towards the battle, but it is not enough. Our pilots are dog fighting with the invaders over the Southwestern desert, but it is not enough.

"The Confederacy needs you, and I need you. I am ordering every member of every State Militia to report to your unit before dawn tomorrow, packed and ready to fight. Every man with military experience, even if you are too old or too disabled to be an official militia member, I am asking you in the name of our God, our people and our country to do the same! We need your skills, and if you walk and hold a rifle, you can fight! If you can't fight, there will be other equally necessary work for you to do.

"In this struggle, no man is too young or too old, we can still use you. Report to your local unit. Whether you can fight, drive, shift freight, roll bandages, or just sweep floors, we need you!

"If you're a Southern man, your country needs you, and it needs you now. Mark my words; this will be the war they'll talk about as long as you live, as long as Dixie herself lives, and when your grandchildren ask about it, you will thank God that you can tell them that you were *there*, that you stood with your brothers in the breach, while the man who was not will hang his head in shame and wish, on his dying bed, that he had stood with his people!

"Ladies; I ask the most of you. Not only am I asking you to continue with the rescue effort here in Columbia. I'm asking you to make the country run while your men are doing their duty, and I am asking you to give Dixie your men to do that duty. I know the depths of what I'm asking you for; believe me, I know! I wouldn't ask if it weren't necessary. We are building a God-fearing country that is fit to live in, to bring up children in and see them grow up strong and good, and that is something worth fighting for.

"I also want to ask that everyone take a few minutes to go down on their knees tonight and pray for us in this coming struggle. Ask God that He may strengthen our hearts and our arms, and preserve this Godly nation, for that's what we are; one of the last Godly nations upon the Earth. Ask that Jesus fill our hearts, not with the cowardice of the armies who cowered before Goliath, but with the courage of David, who, upon beholding the fierce giant, asked this question: 'Who is this uncircumcised Philistine to defy the armies of the Living God?'"

Amidst the responding roar, a little, dark haired, five year-old girl broke away from her mother standing near the front of the crowd, and slipped between both the barricades and the rank of armed Irregulars. Heedless of her mother's frantic calls, she laboriously made her way up to Frank as fast as her short legs could carry her, stretching them to reach the steps. One of the new makeshift Congressmen stepped out to catch her, but Frank waved him back. She reached the podium, and looked up at him with tear-filled eyes. Frank was reminded too much of his own daughter, and he had to fight a battle within himself to keep from completely losing control of his emotions. Finally, he swallowed hard, and said, "Yes, honey?"

"I just wanted you to know that I'm awful sorry about your little girl Linda! I'm awful sorry!"

With that, she held out her arms, offering a hug.

In an instant, Frank was on his knees on the concrete, embracing her tightly while she clung to his neck and wept. In his arms, she felt much like his Linda had, and, in some way, he couldn't shake the feeling that it was her spirit offering him what comfort she could. After a moment, he rose to his feet, still holding her as silent tears slid down his face. Nodding toward her, he looked at the sobbing crowd that was crying for him.

"See this little girl right here? *This* is what we fight for; in the end, when it all comes down to it, this is what we've *always* fought for." He released his left hand to gesture first at himself, and then in the general direction of the flag flying over the building. "Not for me, not for a piece of cloth, or a piece of ground, or for

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some kind of political philosophy; none of this means anything next to *this*! This is our Cause! This has always been our Cause! We must secure a future for this child, and for every child like her in this Confederacy of ours, no matter what it costs, and no matter what we have to do to make it happen! This end is worth the means – *any means*!" Lifting the girl higher, he roared out, "Here are your real colors! This is your real flag! It's time to rally on the colors!"

The last words came out as a shout, but their echoes were instantly drowned by the wild yells of the crowd, and from them and every home with a TV or radio on, they echoed across the Confederacy. As he handed the child to one of the Mississippi Delegation to carry back to her mother, someone began chanting, "Frank! Frank! Frank!" over and over, and someone else took it up, then several more someones, until the Southern earth beneath their feet vibrated from the force of it.

The Southern Historical Observer

The call to arms worked well, almost too well in some cases. Besides every able-bodied man between seventeen and forty-five, millions more were crowding the local militia headquarters across the South by the time the bloody red sun broke over the horizon. From grizzled, stooped old men to runaway smooth-skinned boys just hitting puberty to cripples barely able to walk, they came, most of them shouldering their own rifles and hung with pistols, knives and hatchets, ready and willing to take the war to the enemy. High school and even junior high ROTC units turned up in full uniform on "unofficially acquired" school buses with all the equipment they could lay their hands on: begged, borrowed, and not infrequently stolen. Even county jails and state prisons emptied most of their cells, armed everyone out of the police arsenals, and delivered their prisoner volunteers by the bus load to fight side by side with their former jailers. Many a mother, wife, or daughter bravely kissed their men and boys goodbye, then sobbed as soon as they were out of sight. Once they recovered, they would go to fill the men's jobs, and woe betide the able bodied male who they found outside some position absolutely necessary who hadn't joined up. He would be in for a tongue-lashing at the very least, and often as not for physical assault…

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CHAPTER 56

"Our first priority is to repel the invasion, but, after what they've done, that's not enough. I'm not going to fight a defensive battle; I intend to attack our attacker on his home turf and bust them wide open! Mexico is going to pay a price in more than lives; they're going to pay it in land!"

General Lannigan nodded his agreement and took a sip of his coffee as they studied the three dimensional table map before them.

"I agree wholeheartedly. We have the opportunity to come out of this not only still free, but in a strategically advantageous position in the long term."

"I'm thinking of the Baja peninsula and Sea of Cortez, General."

"Absolutely. Following the repulsing of the invasion, a Pacific port should be our logical first priority."

"Secondly," Admiral Hardy broke in, pointing at the map with the ink pen he had been absently twirling between his fingers, "here: as much of the Gulf coast if possible. If we end up owning enough of it, we control the entire Gulf of Mexico."

"My thoughts exactly; we'll get to that in a minute. General, how do you propose we drive to the Pacific?"

"We use the Marine, Naval Air, and militia forces in their direct path to form a northern front to slow and ultimately halt the Mexicans' advance, and cut the bridges behind them, to their south, cutting their supply lines and trapping them in our arena to be dealt with at leisure. In the meantime, I recommend we begin a heavy bombing campaign in a line all along the Mexican side of the border; killing any forces and blunting any potential resistance to our counter-invasion in the area."

"Blast a corridor behind them and go through it in a blitzkrieg rush to the west, driving straight for the Baja?"

"Exactly. Once we start the push, we begin dropping airborne troops ahead to secure the bridges and passes we'll need; they're the dots. Then we use the Marine cavalry and mobile infantry as shock troops to connect those dots; they'll be the spearhead to punch a path through to the airborne, and more infantry and militia forces to secure it behind them. As we halt their forces on our side of the line, we feed more and more of the Southeastern militia units into the Southern Front, acting as a wedge and spreading the gap southward. It'll be touchy, because some of the fighting will have to be in built-up urban areas in enemy territory, but hopefully we can get through before they can figure out just what we're up to and bog us down."

Frank's face was hard as he thought about the explosion in Columbia, his dead friends, and his dead little girl.

I doubt we'll even have enough left to bury! Damn it!

He thought about the hell he knew he was going through right now, and the even worse hell Sammie must be suffering, and he thought about who was at fault. His jaw ground back and forth, the muscles of his face twisted in fury for just a second, and then suddenly he was as calm as ice, as cold and frozen and implacable and merciless as a glacier, grinding everything in its way into rubble. The officers looked at one another, knowing something terrible had just happened inside their President, but not at all sure what. When it finally left his lips, his voice was unnaturally calm, almost as if he were talking about the weather, instead of the deadly man-made storm that was coming.

"No it won't, because I don't intend for there to be any built-up urban areas left in their way for them to have to fight through. There won't be many left deeper in Mexico either, by the time we get through."

He pointed at the map again. "I am going to do what the Romans did when Hannibal invaded; rather than just fighting the war on their own homeland, they attacked the enemy's home. We're going to use the Naval Air, along with Naval shelling along the Gulf, to tie up every last Mexican soldier deeper in Mexico, as well as make every one of them close to us more anxious to go home rather than try to cut through and reinforce the ones here. While the cities and military installations along our path west are primary targets, every dam, every power plant, every oil field, and every major city in Mexico is now a secondary target of opportunity. The dams especially; those are a priority, because the collateral damage their destruction will cause is greater than anything we can do short of nuclear weapons. Mexico will rue the day they murdered our people!"

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There was judgment in his tone, and the men looked at each other, their eyes widening as the realization of just what he was talking about set in. The pragmatic Lannigan nodded his approval – after all, it was Marine lives those actions would be saving, and if he had to trade massive collateral Mexican casualties for that savings, as well as for victory and for retribution for what they had done, it was a deal he wouldn't lose much sleep over. Seeing his friend wasn't going to object, Hardy was the one who spoke.

"Sir, the international reaction…"

"To hell with the international reaction!" Frank snapped as he rounded on his subordinate. "If I wasn't afraid of starting world-wide nuclear war, I would have already turned that whole damned country into a radioactive parking lot!" He stopped for a moment; he knew better than to let that idea take hold, because right now, he couldn't trust himself not to do it anyway. "They bombed Columbia; now they're going to wish they hadn't! Use HE, fuel-air, Napalm, whatever it takes, and cut a clear path for our men the fastest and most efficient way possible, and *damn* the consequences! If that means sacrificing one of their cities to save even one of our Marines, do it! Save the roads and bridges we'll need, but level everything else in the way that even looks like it might offer resistance, and pound the other strategic targets with every last bit of ordinance we have to spare.

"Understand this; Mexico is going to *suffer!* I don't intend to fight off another invasion by anyone; I'm going to make an example now, so it will never have to be repeated. By their own actions, Mexico has set the tone for this conflict; they've made their bed, and now the sons of bitches can *die* in it!"

"Sir," Hardy asked, the caution evident in his voice, "is this simply strategy, or is it vengeance?"

Frank looked at him with eyes of stone.

"Yes!"

Lannigan, concerned with more practical matters, broke in to point out the obvious, "It's going to be a tough fight. The Mexicans aren't stupid; once we begin moving west, our goal with become obvious, and they'll throw everything they've got left in our path."

"I know. Suggestions?"

"I want General Carnes in charge of the westward push, because I don't know if anyone else can pull it off." Frank nodded; he had been about to say that very same thing himself. "We'll need all the armor we can muster to get through quickly. However, armor is not a long distance proposition; it tends to break down a lot. Go with the standard plan you and President Edge came up with, run ours out to just outside the combat zone on C-130s, flatbeds and railcars, to save wear and tear."

"We'll need a lot of air-to-ground, like Apaches and A10s."

"Definitely, but we'll want to take them from the Southeast, again, because we'll need everything north of there just to stop the advance. That may take days itself."

"How far are the Mexicans likely to go before we can turn them?"

Lannigan rubbed his chin in thought.

"I'm guessing, if they really push it, they could be close enough to take Corpus Christi in less than an hour, and almost certainly San Antonio and San Angelo by morning. Western New Mexico and Arizona will be more difficult for them, due to the terrain, but I'd say they'll take Phoenix before we can stop them, and maybe Albuquerque."

Frank frowned.

"How did they get that far that fast? I warned Governor King and asked him to reinforce the militia all along the border!"

"Sir…"

Frank turned to look at the newly-appointed Texas Congressman, Roy Dunn, who looked so distinctly uncomfortable Frank knew he was not going to like what he heard.

"Uhm," Dunn began again, "that never happened."

The room got deathly quiet, in part because of what was said, and in part because Frank's hand had unconsciously dropped onto the checkered grips of his .45.

"Why?"

"Uh…Governor King ordered it, you see, but General Gaul refused to obey it."

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A muscle began to twitch at the corner of Frank's left eye.

"Why?"

Dunn tugged at his collar as if it had suddenly become too tight.

"Congressman Wright countermanded the order. He said it was an "unfunded mandate," contravening states' rights…"

Several of those in earshot filled the air with various heartfelt profanities at that, but Frank ignored them.

"And the Governor backed down?"

"He had no choice, General…uh, Mr. President. Most of the militia is loyal to him, but General Gaul is not. Unless he wanted open war in his own state…"

"Get Governor King on the phone," Frank told him, never taking his eyes off him, *"Now!"*

Frank's voice came out in a hiss, and Dunn couldn't seem to dial the number on his cell phone fast enough. As soon as the Governor's voice came on the line, he extended it to Frank, who took it with his left hand, his right still on his pistol.

"Governor King? This is Frank Gore."

"*General!"* The voice was full of excitement and renewed hope. *"Thank God you're alive!"*

"Thanks. What the hell is going on with your militia?"

"*Sir…I have no control over most of it! Pending orders to the contrary from Congressman Wright, General Gaul has ordered a full retreat to Austin, and plans to stop them there. I've tried to countermand it, but the only thing I'll accomplish is to divide our forces, and sacrifice the loyal ones to the Mexicans, since there are not enough of them to stop them without the rest!"*

"Congressman Wright is dead, Governor."

"*I know that, sir, but Gaul refuses to listen."*

"Then General Gaul is a traitor, and the last time I checked, Texas knew how to deal with traitors! You're supposed to be the Governor; do you still remember how to do that?"

"*Yes sir!"* From the tone of his voice, there was no question that he not only knew, but was willing and even eager to carry it out now that he knew he had some sort of official backing.

"Another question, then," Frank said, eyes still fixed on Dunn, "Is Mr. Dunn a loyal man?"

"*Yes sir; I'd trust him with my life!"*

Frank eased his hand away from his pistol.

"Good; he's your Congressman now. He'll give you his authorization as well, and you give him the names of anyone on Wright's staff here disloyal to Texas. I'll let Texas deal with them as they see fit. You have total freedom of action, as long as the conspirators are dealt with! No one on this end will second guess your actions; do I make myself clear?"

"Yes sir. And thank you!"

"In the meantime, after you deal with General Gaul, can you halt the Mexicans before San Antonio?"

There was a deep sigh of regret over the phone.

"*I doubt it, sir. I might be able to slow them down, but with our militia in this damned disarray, there's not a prayer of holding them south of there."*

Frank studied the map as he spoke.

"Considering what the Mexican troops are doing to our civilians, that's unacceptable. If you blow the key bridges in front of them, will it slow them appreciably?"

"*Yes sir, that should do it."*

"Then give the order; blow or bomb the crossings over the Leon, the Medina, every river south of the there…General," he called out to Lannigan, "what cities have we lost so far?"

Lannigan pointed at the map. "They've taken Tucson already, along with Las Cruces, El Paso, Laredo…"

"All right. Governor; start the evacuation of San Antonio and all points south still in our hands. Get those people moving north on the Interstates, giving them every possible assistance. Take down every bridge and overpass; give the civilians a chance to get out, but blow them before the Mexicans reach it, or even better with some of them on them."

"That's going to make it hard for our people to counter attack," Lannigan commented, and Frank nodded.

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"I know, but it will also save thousands of our civilians' lives. I need combat engineers on standby to make temporary crossings; they'll be working with mixed Marine and Militia forces when we drive back down from the north and push them out, while more mixed forces enter to take them on the eastern flank on their way through." Shaking his head with disgust, he added, "That's the best we can do at the moment."

After hanging up he turned to Hardy.

"All right; now, what about the Gulf Coast?"

Nodding decisively, back in his comfort zone once more, Hardy began pointing.

"The *Shenandoah* Carrier Group is at Norfolk; I've already called the alert, and they should be putting to sea within the hour. The *Semmes* Group is off Mobile right now; I propose we use them to target the Mexican Gulf and land troops there."

"I can't spare any of the Marine Forces," Lannigan told him flatly, "I'll need every available man to punch through to the west."

"Not Marines," Frank said, stroking his chin in thought, "militia. We'll take the best elite units out of both Carolinas, Georgia, and Florida, and put them aboard. We'll take every man those ships can hold; if we need more, we'll round out the numbers with regular militia."

"Take my Highlanders," Watis said, speaking of his state's elite brigade from the North Carolina mountains. Heavily into their Scots and Scots-Irish roots, the units wore a distinctive gray canvas utility kilt and acted as that militia's rangers. Frank knew they were Watis' pet project, just as the Irregulars were his, and, like them, were one of the top militia units in the entire Confederacy.

The newly-appointed Georgian Congressman promptly offered his state's best unit, the Bulldogs, and his Floridian counterpart threw in the Bull Gators.

"Excellent," Frank said, "and we'll send the Irregulars. Colonel Casey Graham will be in overall command of the militia ground forces."

The new Alabama Congressman was just about to ask why in the hell his state had been passed over, and Frank knew, if TJ Ashby had been present, he would have been asking the same thing about the Louisiana Tigers. The General cut him off with an upraised hand.

"You're not being left out; you, along with additional forces from other states, will be going to Mexico too, only by a different route. You'll be driving west into the gap made by the Marines. I'm also going to need each Gulf State's Coast Guard."

Stabbing at the map, he said, "This is where they'll be going. Once we get to their territory, we're going to hang a left and thrust straight down the Mexican Gulf Coast, wedging the Mexicans off to the west. Graham will take the Yucatan, then begin moving north to link up. I intend to own the entire coast, all the way down to Belize."

"What about the Mexican civilians?"

"Force them west too." He began pointing at various cities on the map. "Make them evacuate to these points, and make them understand that any Mexican nationals left in the area we are coming through will be considered to be guerrillas and will be dealt with accordingly. Let them know they don't have a choice."

"You're talking ethnic cleansing here, Mr. President," Hardy said, the warning plain in his voice, and Frank nodded.

"That's exactly what I'm talking about, Admiral. This is going to be Confederate territory, not Mexican; they should be thankful we're allowing them to leave, rather than slaughtering them like their people are doing ours in the Southwest...like they did ours in Columbia."

"But the international – "

"*Do not* 'but' me again, Admiral," Frank said so coldly that several of those present involuntarily shifted their weight, as if to distance themselves from Hardy. "Your job – your *only* job – is to run this navy and fight these ships. I'm surrounded by politicians already, and I don't need another one. Do you understand me?"

Hardy stiffened, his face feeling like it was burning, but managed a "Yes sir."

"Good. Now, I have a job of my own to do. Send my regards to Admiral Montgomery aboard the *Semmes* and tell him to get ready to receive the men, and to make room on board for every last one that will fit without interfering with the combat readiness of his ships. I need the Congressmen from North Carolina, Georgia, and

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Florida to contact your militias and, without giving any details they don't need to know, get the affected units moving toward Mobile ASAP. General Lannigan, you coordinate the movements of Alabama and Louisiana. General Hodges, get me Colonel Graham! I have orders for him."

"Sir?"

Frank looked up from the map and blinked at the man for a moment, sorting names and faces before recognizing him as Joe Potts, the highest ranking member of the Virginia delegation, meaning he had been secretary to Edge's Chief of Staff, Arthur Hill.

"Yes, Mr. Potts?"

"Sir, I don't know what we're going to do…Virginia, I mean."

Frank turned to give him his full attention, which gave Potts the indication to go on.

"I mean, President Edge and his secretary are dead, and most of my state's government was down here with him: the governor and lieutenant governor, the head of our militia and his executive officer, even half our senate and legislature. They were all here, and now…"

He spread his hands in a gesture of helplessness as Frank quickly ran through his options. That the man was humble enough to admit he had a problem meant that he had brains, and cared more for his state than for his ego. Suddenly a solution came to him, one that would test the limits of those possibilities.

"Are you willing to go outside the box? I mean, *way* outside?"

"I'll do whatever it takes to support my state and the Confederacy, sir. Virginia has never shirked its duty, and it won't start now!"

Resting an approving hand on Potts' shoulder, Frank nodded. "All right. I won't force you to do this, but I will ask you too, for the good of Virginia and the South."

Potts looked him in the eye and said, "Tell me what you want me to do."

With a nod, Frank said over his shoulder to anyone who might be listening, "Get Jack Boggess on the phone; we're going to have a conference call."

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DAY 1093

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CHAPTER 57

Television Address by Congressman Jack Boggess

It is with a heavy heart I assume overall command of the forces of both the Virginias, east and West. Jonathon Edge will be missed, as will the Governor of the Great State of Virginia, and General Sutter, head of its militia, along with the hundreds of others who were cowardly murdered in Columbia, including West Virginia's own Governor Putney. And yet, despite my grief, I also have a tinge of excitement, because of far more than just this war.

Whatever happens in this conflict, the Virginias will hold! The spirit of General Stonewall Jackson walks these hills tonight, and he walks within us all. His ghost strides through our ranks and in our hearts, exhorting us to action, and we will not let him down! It is our turn to step into the breach now, and our turn to be that stone wall! With our brothers to the west in the Bluegrass State, and those to the east in the Old Line, we will by God hold this border against all comers, to the last bullet in our guns, the last breath of air in our lungs, and to the last drop of blood in our veins if necessary. The Virginias have always done their duty, and we will continue to do it, and we will stand before the Yankees, the Mexicans, or the devils of Hell itself if necessary, but we will not give one, solitary inch!

Today, though, I'm excited for another reason. For the first time in a century and a half, celebrating the spirit of Lee and Jackson, estranged brothers' hands have finally reached out to one another across these misty blue mountains, and joined together as one. On this grim night, we are all Virginians, and on this day, there is only one Virginia!

"The US has stepped back, and now I'm going to see to it they stay back. We have to act now before they regain their balance and get any ideas; we've got to keep them backing up, not only to prevent them from interfering now, but to show our own resolve strongly enough that they'll think twice before trying it again. They're going to pay the price in their own security." He turned to Hardy. "You've still got forces in the Chesapeake; I'm going to need some rapid naval transport across the bay, and as many Sailors and Marines as you can reasonably spare to back up the Old Line Militia. By morning, I want all of Confederate Eastern Maryland, including the Delmarva Peninsula and Saint Mary's County sealed off, and I want missile batteries: enough ship killers, surface to surface, and surface to air, to make sure it stays secure."

"But sir, the treaty..."

Frank cut him off. "To Hell with the treaty! A treaty is only in force as long as both sides keep their end of it; once one side breaks faith, it becomes null and void. After what they did, I dare them to mention the damned treaty to me!" He forced himself to calm down. "Like I said, they've proven we can't trust them; therefore, we've got to keep them off-balance, and now that they're backing up already, we have the opportunity. I'm going to secure the Old Line State as just that; a solid line, a buffer, a first strategic line of defense for the upper coast, and I'm going to fully cement Confederate control of the Chesapeake once and for all. Nothing will come and go there unless we let it." He tapped the area in question on the map with the knuckle of his index finger. "We're not going to interfere with their traffic unless I have reason to believe they're getting ready to attack us, but I want to be able, not just to seal the mouth of the bay at a moment's notice, but to control the upper bay as well, and I want them to know we can do it. Just as importantly, the move will throw them completely off balance; it'll take them a long time to get over the shock of waking up to find Marines and missiles within thirty miles of DC, and God knows, that's time we can use."

"This is a dangerous game you're playing here, Frank."

Frank looked at him levelly.

"I know that, and I intend to win it!"

Frank reflected that, considering what the long range plans currently taking shape in his mind concerning his enemy to the north were, Hardy had no idea just how dangerous it was going to get. Maryland was only the

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first move; he was just getting started.

"Mr. President?"

"Yes, Admiral?" Roberts said tiredly, not looking up from the map on his computer screen.

"Sir, the Confederates are fortifying both the lower Del Marva peninsula and the Point Lookout area."

"What?" Roberts sat upright in his chair with enough force to send his forgotten coffee sloshing from the cup in his hand. "How far along are they?"

"They're already relatively secure, and we estimate they'll be fully dug in by sunrise, sir."

"That quickly? How?"

"They're determined, sir; they've commandeered every civilian craft and private plane in their territory to move their men and equipment – even sailing yachts and fishing boats. They've landed commandos with Surface to Air and Chinese-made Silkworm ship killers first, and then flooded the area with Maryland, Virginia and West Virginia Militia, backed up by at least a regimental-strength unit of mixed Sailors and Marines. We've also detected what appear to be Russian-made mobile land-based missile launchers, sir, most likely surface to surface and capable of carrying nuclear weapons, although we can't confirm that. I await your orders, sir."

"Have they issued a statement regarding their actions?"

"Yes sir, it just came in." He offered the President the printout, but Roberts shook his head.

"Read it."

Sanchez obeyed.

To the Government of the United States of America:

Due to your blatant breach of the Montreal Treaty, and your acts of aggression, including using your NSA head John Ostrovsky to conspire with the Government of Mexico in order to facilitate a terrorist attack against us, a mass assassination of members of our government, and an invasion of the Confederate States of America, we are hereby forced to nullify the sections of the said treaty concerning the militarization of eastern Maryland, and to suspend all traffic on the Ohio River until further notice in order to insure our own security. We have no intention of attacking you, or of crossing into your sovereign territory, unless we are attacked, in which case, we will defend ourselves with every necessary means at our disposal, with neither exception nor restraint.

"The authorization is in the name of 'Acting President of the Confederate States of America, General Franklin Gore.' How should we respond, sir?"

Roberts sighed.

"Reinforce the area between them and us, cover Washington with every bit of air defense we have, and make certain they remain contained within their borders, but otherwise, do absolutely nothing to aggravate the situation."

"But sir, the treaty..."

"Sanchez, *we* broke the treaty, remember? Besides, do you want to fight a nuclear war over a piece of land they already occupy?"

"Mr. President, do you really think they'd try that?"

Roberts looked at him coldly.

"If the shoe was on the other foot, and they had had a hand in murdering *my* daughter, *I* would have already done it!"

When it was put like that, Admiral Sanchez could only say, "Yes sir."

Settling back into his chair, the President rubbed both hands along side of his head, sweeping his hair back and blowing out his breath in frustration.

"Do you think they can beat Mexico?"

"It depends on how you define 'beat' sir. If the explosion in Columbia had had its apparent desired effect, then no; the Mexicans would overrun their southwestern states in two or three days at most. With Gore alive and in charge, however, I don't think that's going to happen; he's one tough, smart son of a bitch, and he can be ruthless when he has to. Now that his daughter is dead, he's capable of anything. My bet is that he's going to

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cut a big chunk out of Mexico; he'll drive straight for the Sea of Cortez, aiming to get a Pacific port. That's the only logical move."

"Surely the rest of Latin America – Cuba and Venezuela at least – will reinforce the Mexicans? They've already got troops there!"

"No sir, that's not likely at this point." He extended a printout. "Cuba has just declared itself strictly neutral in this conflict, and has ordered the evacuation of its troops from Mexico. Our intelligence sources tell us that they have applied pressure to the Venezuelans, and, as Cuban support is all that's propping up their regime at the moment, we believe they will comply. Our satellites indicate that that they are already packing up and getting ready to leave."

"But…they've always pushed for a united Latin America against the 'Yankee imperialists!'"

"Politically we're the Yankees, sir, not the Confederates; their beef is with us. Besides…to put it crudely, money talks and bullshit walks, Mr. President. With their treaty with the South, Cuba's economy has climbed noticeably just in the past weeks. They're banking on the Confederacy to pull them out of the economic sewer they've been living in since the Communists took over back in the sixties, and that's too valuable to lose, especially since Venezuela can't offer them anything but a drain on their own already-stretched resources."

Roberts shook his head at the nightmare that would be for the United States if the Southerners reached their goal; it would leave the Confederacy as strategically powerful in terms of territory as they were...perhaps even more so, what with the Mexican mines and oil fields they would be taking in the process. That situation was unacceptable.

"Look, what can we do to keep them from reaching the Baja without going to war with them ourselves? I don't give a damn about the rest of Mexico, but we can't allow them a Pacific coast or we'll be strategically screwed! Give me some options, damn it!"

Sanchez sighed.

"I have one, Mr. President. We can't save Mexico, but every hour we can delay the Confederate drive to the west, we increase the odds of the conflict being brought to a forcible halt by the UN; they will doubtless send a peacekeeping force if the Mexicans can hold out long enough. We'll give them what they need to hold the Southerners back until then."

"How do we do that without sparking actions against us?"

"We loudly and publicly proclaim those resources were stolen from us; after all, there are a lot of Latinos in the military whose hearts will be with their brethren. If they were to take their tanks across the Mexican – *not* the Confederate – border in violation of orders..."

As the Admiral unfolded his plan, Roberts saw a thin ray of hope.

"Do it!"

"Tiff?" Philindy called out, extending Tiffany's cell phone as she worked her way through the heavily-armed Mountaineer Militiamen trying to get them settled into a new safe house: not actually a house, but a formerly US-held anti-terrorism training center several hundred feet beneath the rock of Paint Creek Mountain that had begun life a one of the tunnels for the West Virginia Turnpike. The place had its own cell phone tower, so they could get reception in there. "There's a phone call for you."

Tiffany stuck her hand out and muttered "Thanks," through the tears that were still seeping down her wet, puffy cheeks, even though her heart wasn't in it. With the boy – the man – she loved gone, she couldn't see much of anything left.

"Hello?"

"*Tiff?"*

At the sound of the voice on the other end of the line, it seemed like the mountain above her head had suddenly appeared out of nowhere and gotten caught in her throat, leaving her unable to speak.

"*Tiff?"* he repeated urgently, *"Are you there?"*

"Rick? I-is it r-r-really you?"

"*It's me."*

He had to wait for almost two minutes while she cried with hysterical relief, in between bouts of

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castigating him for not calling, before he could get a word in.

"*Tiff, listen! I don't have much time!"*

"What's wrong?"

"*I'm getting ready to ship out with Colonel Graham; we're on our way to Mexico."*

"But…but…" She didn't want to go through thinking she had lost him again; she really didn't think she *could.*

"Please, Rick! You can't – "

"*I have to. My unit is deploying, and I'm deploying with it. Besides, I've got a debt to pay."*

Something in his voice focused her attention more than the words themselves.

"What do you mean?"

"*My…"* She heard his voice catch and him swallowing hard before he could continue. *"My parents and my little sister were at the celebration when…it happened."*

"Oh my God, Rick! I am so, so sorry!" She meant it from the bottom of her heart; it hurt her more than she would have believed just to know he was hurting. What he had told her also said loudly and clearly that there was no point in trying to dissuade him from going now. She was from Scots-Irish mountain stock, and, like her Celtic forebearers, the idea of the feud, the responsibility of a blood debt was something she understood in the core of her very being, more than simply in her mind.

"*Thanks. Listen, I've got to go, but I wanted you to know before I leave…I love you, and I want you to marry me. I was going to get the ring tomorrow and surprise you with it on my next trip. I can see if I can get the chance to get one and send it up – "*

"No, you will not send it up! Yes, I'll marry you, but you've got to bring it to me yourself and ask proper, just as soon as you get back! I don't want it without you attached to it, and I want to make sure you have a reason to come back to me!"

"*Are you sure?"*

"Yes, I'm sure – about all of it!" She was crying anew. "Now you listen to me; I love you, so you'd better come back!"

"*I'll do my best; I'm just glad I've still got someone left to come back to."* She heard some shouted orders in the background, and he told her, *"I've got to go. I love you."*

"I love you too," she managed to whisper, and then she was holding a phone with the words *Call Ended* on the illuminated screen.

Without another word to anyone, like so many Southern women before her, like so many in Dixie this very night, she walked over and took the Bible lying on the just-unpacked table, carried it to the partitioned area that was her room, and closed the curtain that passed for a door behind her.

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CHAPTER 58

"Sammie?"

At the sound of Cynthia's voice, Samantha numbly raised her head from her arms where it had been resting on an unused desk in an empty office. The picture of her daughter on the blotter before her was covered with tear stains. Turning away reluctantly, she saw her bodyguard extending a cell phone.

"Vika wants to talk to you."

"Vika?" Instantly she was on her feet, so suddenly that her swollen belly bumped the table painfully enough to make her gasp and stagger. The Russian had been there at the celebration; she had seen her on TV sitting beside Jonathon Edge just minutes before the blast. If she were alive, then maybe...

She snatched the phone from Cynthia so quickly her nails accidentally scraped blood from the younger girl's skin.

"Hello? Vika, is it you?"

"Sammie? I-I'm so sorry!" The woman was sobbing, and with her thick accent, she was hard to understand, but there was no mistaking her tone. The first shreds of renewed hope instantly crumbled into ash.

"Yeah...thanks. Me too. I..." She paused, choking and clamping a hand over her mouth to stifle the grief that threatened to come pouring out. "I'm glad you made it. How..."

"I was looking for a bathroom, and Sam saved me."

"Sam!" she exclaimed. "Sam's alive?"

"Y-yes, I thought you knew. We're in the hospital. He's hurt badly and has several broken bones, but they say he's in stable condition..."

Emotions warred in Samantha's heart as Victoria relayed the events to her as best she understood them, and why she and Sam had lived and Linda...had not.

"Can you both be moved?"

"I suppose; they're moving us all over the building now, trying to make room for more casualties."

"Don't go anywhere! I'll send some people to get you both and bring you here."

"Sammie...Sam won't come. He...he says can't face you."

"He doesn't have a choice!" she snapped and clicked off the phone before turning to Cynthia.

"Get Frank now!" Before the girl could move, she said, "Never mind. Just come with me, and I'll get him myself."

I've sat around and cried long enough for now! I've got to do something before I go stark, raving mad...if I haven't already...Oh Linda...

As she walked beside her boss, Cynthia couldn't help noticing the way Samantha's hand kept caressing the butt of her pistol like a rosary. She didn't remark on it; there was no point.

Frank glanced over his shoulder at the sound of the door opening into his improvised command center to see who had just come in, and was more than a little startled to see Samantha with no makeup and red, swollen eyes, but a determined look on her face. Instantly he went to her and, heedless of everyone else in the room studiously affecting concentration on other things, pulled her to him and held her, desperately fighting the emotional tidal wave that threatened to overwhelm him.

Once he finally trusted his voice, he asked if she were all right.

"No," she whispered, "I'll never be all right again. You?"

"Same here. Stupid question, I guess."

"What else do you say at a time like this? At least..." Her voice caught and trailed off, and she had to force herself to try again. "At least there's some...good news. I just heard from Vika; Sam's alive."

"What!" he exclaimed, before he realized he was shouting, and lowered his voice. "How did they..."

He didn't finish the sentence: *How did they live and my little girl die,* but he didn't have to. Samantha nodded her agonized understanding.

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"He was helping Vika find a bathroom – " *Oh God, how could something so mundane decide who lives and who dies?* "– and..." She lifted her hand to her mouth and began crying again; she couldn't help it. "H-he…he asked Donna to hold Linda until he g-g-got back."

He asked, "Are they all right?" because he didn't know what the hell else to say.

"They're wounded, but Vika says Sam's stable and that they're moving them around the hospital, trying to make room for the casualties that keep coming in."

"Then we'll bring them here, before something happens to them too..." Suddenly the rage inside him built up to something more than he could bear any longer, and he spun away from her with an inarticulate roar and threw his right fist into the wall, punching a hole in the plaster and sending everyone scrambling to their feet in alarm. Immediately Frank looked somewhat embarrassed, and ignored both the others and his own bloody knuckles, turning back to his wife as if the incident had never happened, despite the plain evidence of the chips and dust that was still trickling down.

"We'll have the Irregulars bring them in," he said with a startling calmness. "Sammie, do you feel up to giving Hodges the instructions?"

She knew the question he was really asking: *Do you want to try to occupy your mind with something else for awhile?* After his own brief loss of control, he was concerned about her mental health. For that matter, so was she.

"Yes, and thank you," she whispered, following it by lowering her face against his chest. "I love you!"

"And I love you. Please...just get them here!" he whispered in return.

As soon as she could force herself to let go, he turned and started giving orders once again, crisply and calmly, and she motioned for the newly-promoted General Hodges. As soon as she told him what she wanted, he was on the line with Graham and Long, looking for whoever had a squad to spare for a few minutes.

Carla Dover was working in a state of shock, running purely on automatic pilot. It was nothing more than the conditioned reflex part of her mind taking blood pressures, putting in IVs, and putting pressure on spurting wounds until someone else could close them, and there was no room for her to hear the screams, moans, curses and cries that filled the packed corridors of Columbia General as anything more than a background murmur. The rooms were full, the halls were full, and still more casualties came, walking in, being rolled in, being carried in, occasionally even being dragged in on bloody blankets, an endless stream of blood and panic. The facility was no longer an ordinary public hospital; it had transformed into a battlefield medical unit, where the parade of the wounded, or the infinite variety of the work of violence on human bodies, never seemed to stop. The nursing part of her triaged them quickly and with brutal efficiency: a piece of metal chair leg blown into a gut like a blunt spear, a heart attack from shock, go to the front of the line; a shattered arm or a head with part of the brain leaking out, to the back, one to wait until they could get around to him, the other for death. Their limited human and medical resources had to be spent on the ones who most needed them, and still had a reasonable chance of benefiting from them. Tunnel-visioned doctors rushed from place to place, blood spattered across their scrubs or, for some of them, their street clothes they hadn't gotten the chance to change out of, and orderlies ran gurneys this way and that, bringing in the living and carrying out the dead. She threaded her way amongst them like an automaton.

The rest of her mind was occupied by the fate of her only child, Cynthia. She had been giving an appendix patient his postoperative pain medication, and had glanced at the celebration he was watching on the TV in his room, just in time to see the explosion. The blast was so powerful that they not only heard it in the hospital, but felt its rumbling vibration through the reinforced concrete floors.

Frank and Samantha were there, and wherever they were, her daughter was there too.

Although her voice remained professional and steady, the tears had yet to stop. They fell from her face like a gentle, steady rain that had set in for a lifetime. Her only solace, if you could call it that, was that she was a long way from being alone; it seemed as if everyone, patient and hospital personnel alike, was weeping over what had been done.

Preoccupied as she was, she literally jumped when he heard the name 'Cynthia' mentioned. Jerking her

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head at the sound, she had to look hard before she recognized Victoria Slastyonoff, covered with dust and dirt, a bloody bandage on her head and yelling into the cell phone in one ear while she held a finger to the other to block out the hospital noises. She didn't see Carla approaching as she pressed the disconnect button.

"Vika?"

When the woman turned towards her, Carla was appalled. The Russian had always been beautiful and glamorous in that somewhat exotic fashion peculiar to many Eastern Europe women, but not now. Dried blood had matted her black hair to her scalp around the hasty bandage, her right eye was black and swollen completely shut, and more blood caked her nostrils, ears and her smashed, swollen lips. It looked as if her nose might be broken.

Victoria's good eye widened in surprise.

"Carla! I didn't know you worked here!"

"Vika...I heard you say...Cynthia's name..."

Gesturing with the cell phone, she said, "Yes, I was just talking with her and Sammie – "

She managed to catch Carla as her knees buckled under a completely overwhelming wave of relief, and Victoria held her up even as she screamed with pain from the dislocated middle finger of her right hand that had yet to be set. The scream brought Carla back to her senses, and she looked in horror at the finger, sticking out at an angle it was never meant to assume.

"I'm sorry!" she told her excitedly, "but I thought Cynthia..."

The Russian smiled at her through her own tears of pain.

"No! They weren't there! Haven't you heard? Frank gave their tickets to Tommy and Donna, and they took little Linda with them..."

Her voice trailed off as she put a hand to her own mouth, and both women began crying at the thought. Carla had been the attending nurse when Linda was delivered, as well as remaining friends with the Gores during and after the war.

"An-anyway," Victoria finally managed, "they've sent for me, and for Sam. Some soldiers will be coming to bring us to them."

"And my daughter is there?" When the injured woman nodded, Carla said, "You and Sam are both wounded and have only been halfway treated, and Sammie's pregnant; you'll need a nurse on site! I'm coming with you!"

At least that was the excuse she would always give for leaving her post where she was much needed. Right now, as a mother, as a friend, and as a patriot, she had higher priorities.

They bounced along silently in the Humvee in the wee hours of morning, each one lost in their own thoughts. The silent, grim-faced Irregulars were itching for revenge; their grief had been rendered into anger, and it drained from the pores of their souls like sweat, so strong you could smell it. Sam, his wheelchair wedged in the back, gripped securely by two of them, stared blankly ahead, wondering what he could say to two people he had loved and failed in the worst way possible that would make them not hate him. He wouldn't blame them if they shot him; in fact, part of him fervently hoped they would. The way he felt over the death of both his Goddaughters, he would be thankful for the mercy of a bullet just to take away the pain he was feeling right now. Victoria didn't feel much better about it, and felt like dying herself over the loss of the man she had loved long before she ever knew him. Carla sat beside her, not on the seat, but on the lap of an Irregular less than her own daughter's age, as there was no room for her anywhere else. The young man was so distracted by the events he barely noticed, and Carla didn't notice at all; her mind was primarily on her daughter.

Yes, she's an adult now, but she's still my little girl!

Carla was overjoyed to learn that Cynthia was alive, but the fact that her "little girl" had not called her to let her know that had infuriated her for a time. By the start of the trip, when she had exited the hospital in the middle of a crowd of heavily-armed, angry men pushing Sam in his wheelchair, she had been so furious that she was nursing the half-formed idea of taking her nineteen year-old daughter into the nearest ladies' room where they could get some privacy, and having a little *'discussion'* with her that the girl would never forget as

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long as she lived. Then she blushed with shame when she realized that there was no way she could have been reached in the chaos of the hospital, and, as per regulations, the cell phone in her purse was turned off. Sheepishly, she fished it out and turned it on to find a voice mail from Cynthia, telling her she loved her and not to worry, that she was all right and with Samantha. She also found half a dozen other voice mails, each one increasingly more frantic than the other, from a familiar number located over four hundred miles away in West Virginia.

She pressed the call button, and the phone didn't even complete its first ring when an excited male voice was shouting into it.

"Carla! Is that you, honey?"

"Hey, Larry, I just got – "

"Are you and Cinders okay?"

"Yes, we're – "

"God, I was afraid you had been caught in the blast! I called – "

As she waited for Captain Larry Hall – a Mountaineer militiaman who went by the nickname of 'Possum' – run on and on until he had to take a breath so she could get a word in edgewise, the first smile of the night momentarily tweaked at the corners of her mouth. Larry had escorted her home to Columbia following months of imprisonment by the Feds, and the two had been carrying on a long-distance relationship ever since. Once the war had ended, they saw each other a couple of times a month, whenever he could get away to get down there, and Carla had to admit that she was pretty sure she was falling in love with him, but she didn't know if those feelings were reciprocated until she heard him now, almost out of his mind with worry.

Finally he ran out of wind and she interjected, "Larry!" in a sharp tone, getting his attention, and quickly went ahead before he could get started again. "I was on shift at the hospital when it happened, and we had thousands of casualties pouring through; we couldn't even begin to keep up with the wounded, let alone call anyone."

"Then Cinders is all right too?"

Carla smiled at the use of his homespun nickname for her daughter. Cynthia hated it, or said she did whenever Larry wasn't around, but she didn't seem to find it quite so unacceptable when he was using it; in fact, the two got along great, and the normally irrepressible man called 'Possum' seemed to be as much a factor as anything else in drawing the girl at least a little ways out of the protective shell she had built for herself. That, nearly as much as his caring and thoughtful, if occasionally teasing treatment of her, had pretty well cinched Carla's feelings in his regard.

"Cynthia is just fine; I'll tell her you asked." Feeling the vehicle slowing down, she glanced forward through the windshield and told him, "Listen, we've just arrived at the Confederate Building, and she's inside, along with the Gores. I've got to go, but I'll call you as soon as I can."

"You be sure and do that!" he instructed, adding, "If you need anything, anything at all, or anything happens, you call me and I'll be there! I don't give a damn what it takes, I'll be there! Do you promise?"

"I promise, Larry," she said in a jokingly long-suffering tone.

"Well, you just be sure you do that. I'll let you go now. Bye.

"Bye."

"Carla?" he said suddenly before she could mash the disconnect button.

"Yes?"

"I love you."

Then he was gone. She held the phone, staring at it for a moment.

Well, I guess I know now.

The Humvee came to a halt and, as the street light poured through the front windows, cutting the darkness of the interior, she got her first really good look at the soldier holding her, and the smile and warm feeling that had started growing immediately faded.

His nametag read CARMICHAEL and his stripes told her he was a corporal, although he was a very young man for that rank; the Palmetto militia started taking them at sixteen, and he couldn't have been more than a year or two past that. She was sure she had met him a few times during the days when she was attached to

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Frank's headquarters, but his countenance was no longer familiar, looking more like a statue of a man rather than the man himself. He had been holding her with one protective arm gently bent around her waist to keep her from sliding off his lap, while his other hand was clenched so tightly around his FN-FAL assault rifle that his knuckles were whitened until they looked as though they might break through the skin. Slender and muscular, his face was fine-featured and handsome, and he wore his blond hair long, tied back in a ponytail behind his black beret. His jaw was set like iron, and his blue eyes never looked at her, but stared straight ahead at something impossibly far away that she couldn't see. Although his body never quivered and his expression never altered, a single tear snaked its way down his cheek.

No boy not even out of high school should ever have that look on his face!

Her maternal instinct reached out for him, along with the hand she placed on his shoulder as she got up.

"What's wrong?" she whispered, and he answered in a deadpan, lifeless voice without ever looking at her.

"My family was at the Capital…all of them."

Carla clamped her hand over her mouth, then hugged him tightly and kissed him on the cheek.

"I'm sorry," she started to say, but he only stiffened under her embrace.

"Please don't do that, ma'am," he told her, still refusing to look at her, "Please don't do that!"

She immediately understood why; he was on the verge of breaking down, and wanted to salvage his dignity, the only thing he had left. Letting him go, Carla patted his hand in a parting gesture.

"I'll pray for you."

"Thanks." His tone never changed throughout their brief conversation, but she noticed the hand he had been so gently holding her with had joined its mate on the stock of his assault rifle, and was absently stroking it up and down, over and over, like one might caress a pet, a lover...or a family member.

She quickly exited the vehicle and fled for the building, unable to stand the sight any longer.

Standing at the door to the empty office where one of the Irregulars told them to wait, Victoria looked at Samantha as she came walking towards her, trailed, as usual, by her blond, submachine gun-toting shadow, Cynthia. She saw the grief in her friend's puffy, bloodshot eyes, and had no idea what to say, since nothing could even begin to make things better. Oddly enough, the Russian recognized that the Southerner still had room in those blue orbs for pity as well, and, when she held out her arms as she approached, Victoria Slastyonoff willingly let herself be enfolded in them...at least until she caught her dislocated finger in a fold of Samantha's blouse and jerked away, crying out in pain.

Samantha looked at her, startled, and then saw the swollen, throbbing, misshapen digit.

"Why hasn't anyone set that?"

"I...there was no time; the hospital was full; Sam was lucky to have his bones set. If we hadn't been among the first ones there, he wouldn't have even had that, I don't think."

Samantha turned to Cynthia before noticing her bodyguard already had the radio to her ear and was calling for a medic.

"Don't bother," Victoria said, "There are many who are hurt worse than I am."

Samantha shook her head while she took the other woman's uninjured hand.

"No, Vika, not tonight. There are some who are hurt just as badly, but *no one* hurts worse than you and I do right now."

Victoria knew she wasn't talking about her finger.

"Th-thank you for saying that...for seeing that."

Samantha started to say something else, choked, and finally got herself under what would have to pass for control. Laying her free hand on Vika's shoulder, she made sure the older woman was looking back at her before she spoke.

"Listen to me. I'm going to have to leave you here for a moment; Frank will be on his way anytime now, and I need to talk to Sam before he gets here."

"It's not Sam's fault!" she said urgently, rushing to his defense with a speed and determination that surprised her even as she said it.

"No, it's not Sam's fault," Samantha told her, patting the Russian's shoulder reassuringly, "and I need to

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make him realize that." She felt like she was betraying her husband by what she was about to say, even though it was the truth. "Frank is holding it together better than I would have thought, far better than I can, but I'm afraid his hold is fragile – it *has* to be fragile after this! I can't let Sam add to the stress on him, because, if Frank loses control right now, everything we've fought for is gone! Worse, for me, is that he'll know that, and I know my husband couldn't live with that kind of guilt."

Glancing at her bodyguard, she said, "Cynthia, stay with her, and make sure no one besides Frank comes through that door."

Cynthia nodded and stood next to Victoria, the Skorpion submachine gun dangling from her hand.

At the sound of the closing door, Sam looked up from his wheelchair into the grief-stricken eyes of the woman he had given away at her wedding, and devoutly wished he had died in the blast.

"Sammie...I...I..."

Suddenly she was across the room as fast as she could waddle with one hand on her belly, and in the next second she was hugging him and crying.

"I'm so glad you're alive! I thought I'd lost you too!"

He hugged her back as best he could with his unbroken arm, and, despite the agony of her grip on his bruises and broken bones, he refused to let the pain show.

"I'm so sorry!" He completely lost it and was crying as hard as she was. "It's my fault! If I had only known..."

He was silenced when Samantha gently laid her fingers across his lips. Her voice was a quaver.

"No, Sam, it's not your fault. And I'm still trying to convince myself it's not mine either, for sending her with you."

"No, Sammie! You didn't know – "

"And neither did you!" she said sharply, "Like you told Frank once, it's *their* fault: the sons of bitches who did it! They're the ones who are going to pay for it, not you!" Using her fingertips, she wiped at his tears with one hand while brushing away her own with her other, despite more of the droplets trying to follow. "Now, you straighten yourself up; you're the closest thing to a father I've got left, and I need you to lean on. More importantly, Frank will be coming in a minute, and he needs you too." Snatching a handful of tissues from the box on the desk, she offered one to him before taking the rest herself. "He's being strong for the whole Confederacy, and somebody's got to be strong for him."

"Yeah, I reckon so, but..."

"Yeah," she said, completing his sentence after he couldn't think of what to finish it with, and blew her nose with a delicate honk.

"So," he said, pulling himself together with visible effort, at least as together as he could manage right now, "who's left?"

"Out of the Congress, just you and Jack Boggess that we know of; TJ Ashby was – and still is – in Japan and we haven't got a secure line yet. Mike, Billy and Cynthia are still alive, along with all the Irregulars and Watis Suggs. Reverend Jase survived; he just left me not five minutes ago. Vika made it, of course, thanks to you."

"That's it?"

"Pretty much," she told him, nodding her head grimly. "Tarbox is alive, for the moment. It turns out he was the traitor who betrayed us all, both at that mountain in North Carolina and here tonight."

"I'll kill that son of a bitch!" Sam roared, spraying bloody spit unnoticed through his swollen lips in anger even as he forgot himself in his rage, gripped the arms of his chair instinctively to heave himself to his feet, and then yelled in agony when his fury-fueled muscles tightened against his injuries. He was gasping with pain, trying to recover his breath, when Samantha gently pushed him back down, shaking her head.

"You'll have to get in line. Anyway, right now, he probably wishes someone would do just that. Mike's security people have him. According to the last update I had, he's spilling his guts as fast as he can, and Mike's getting the names of his co-conspirators out to the affected states as he gets them. This is going to be a long, bloody night, in more ways than one."

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Outside the door, in the outer office of their appropriated suite, Vika stood sobbing for Edge. Cynthia was beside her, her arm around the larger woman's shoulders, doing her best to comfort her.

"I loved him!" she cried, although the voice that came from her was little more than a whisper. "I loved him!"

"I know. He loved you too; you were the best thing that ever happened to him, since I've known him, anyway. He changed so much after he met you."

"R-really?"

"Yeah. He was a lot more pleasant to be around. It's like there was a missing piece to his life before, and he was straining himself trying to stretch far enough to fill the gap. You seemed to fit in and take that strain off him, so he could relax at least a little bit, and be human once in awhile."

Vika held her hand tightly and tried to smile through her tears. "You are kind, and very wise for one so young. Are you sure you're not Russian?"

Cynthia shook her head. "English and Scots-Irish: just a plain old Southern girl."

Victoria gently touched the girl's cheek.

"There's nothing plain about you." Looking at her for a moment, she asked, "Have you ever been in love?"

Cynthia blushed a little and looked down, and her voice was a whisper.

"Yeah, for more than a year now."

"With who?"

As far as she knew, the diminutive bodyguard had kept the secret from everyone but her lover himself, but she didn't know how much longer she could make herself do it. She was a private person, but this woman, at least, needed to hear it, not because of simple curiosity, but as an affirmation that she truly understood. So Cynthia told her, and Victoria's eyes widened with surprise.

"Really? I wouldn't have expected that!"

"He's a good man," she said somewhat defensively, a little stung by Vika's surprise, but the Russian only smiled and reached out with her uninjured hand to stroke Cynthia's short blonde hair.

"He would have to be to have someone special like you."

"Thanks," she replied, the beginnings of her anger instantly evaporating.

"Just do one thing, Cynthia. Love him every chance you get, just as hard as you can, and if you have something to tell him, tell him *now*! These are terrible times we live in, horrible times and you can't take for granted that any of us will have a tomorrow!"

The corners of Cynthia's eyes tightened, and she swallowed hard and nodded. She was thinking of Chucky, who was beaten to death in front of her while trying to save her from the gang rape that left her HIV positive; of her mentor, Rob Johnson, torn in half on a mountaintop in North Carolina; of her best friend, Kerrie O'Brien, lying on her back in the mud with a bullet hole in her forehead while the freezing rain poured down into her open blue eyes that stared sightlessly at the cold gray sky.

"I don't take anything for granted; I've learned better the hard way."

No sooner than the words had left her lips, Cynthia heard boots in the hallway and she closed her hand around the submachine gun's pistol grip...just in case.

She relaxed when she saw it was one of the Irregulars she knew, a stocky, dark-haired, irrepressible sergeant with the unlikely name of Carter Carson, one of the company medics. He was an excellent at what he did, and his constant good humor, especially during times of stress, tended to put people at ease. Seeing Victoria cradling her hand with its stiff digit, he smiled.

"Honey, didn't your mama ever teach you not to give people the finger? Here, let me see that. Tsk, tsk, you need to get a new manicurist." Glancing at her face and acting fey, he added, "and we'll have to do something about that absolutely *atrocious* makeup in just a minute."

Victoria had to smile despite herself, relaxing just a bit, which she knew was the whole purpose of his exaggerated, over-the-top performance. As she watched, he gingerly wrapped his thumb and index finger, tips touching and forming an 'o' around her injury.

"Now, Miss Slastyonoff – "

"Call me Vika."

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Carson nodded and smiled.

"Okay then, Vika; do you know any martial arts?"

Startled by his seemingly off-the-wall question, she said, "I studied in Russia."

"Excellent! You know how to do a yell, a *kiai*?" Seeing her nod, he said, "All right then. I'm going to count to three, and on three, I want you to give me the biggest, loudest *kiai* you've ever done." He pointed at the very lowest part of her flat stomach, just below her navel. "Take a deep breath and bring it from all the way down there, and scream like you're breaking a stack of concrete blocks, okay?"

"Okay," she said tentatively.

"Good. Here we go then; one, two, *three*!"

"I'll be down the hall for a moment," Frank announced, "Tell Billy when he gets out of the john."

Hodges, who had just entered, pointed at two Irregulars doing a combination of standing guard and serving as runners.

"Smith, Platt, you're escort; go with the President."

Frank looked at him without expression.

"I'm only going to be two doors down."

"I don't care if you're going to be two inches down, sir; until we've cleared this building from top to bottom, you're not going anywhere without a security detail, not even to take a leak – not as long as I'm in charge."

Frank continued staring at him for a second or two longer, then nodded his approval.

"You're right, General; keep thinking just that way, and we might all live through this thing."

The six foot-four skinhead refused to let his pride show on his face, but he seemed to grow another inch or two when Frank said, "All right, you two; let's go," and left the room. Without the need for conversation, Smith moved to the front and Platt to the rear, keeping their leader protected in between.

The office where Samantha was, as Frank had pointed out, only two doors down, albeit in a short side corridor off the main hallway. The passage was twenty feet long and ended at a shattered window that the Irregulars had already hung one of the building's rugs over to prevent anyone on the outside from seeing – and accurately shooting – anyone inside. The trio was almost to the short passage when they heard Victoria scream.

Frank and his escort reacted instantly and with the instinct of hard training. Smith threw himself across the mouth of the passage in a dive, rolling into the prone position using the cover of the opposite corner, while Frank and Platt used the wall they were already on, pointing their muzzles of their weapons down the hall.

"Wow," Victoria was saying, "I didn't feel a..." her voice trailed off when she saw the guns aimed at her, and by reflex more than anything else, she finished softly and lamely with "...thing."

Cynthia was already on the floor and aiming right back at them, and her finger had started tightening on the Czech machine pistol when she forced herself to stop, took a deep breath, and moved the muzzle to the side.

The medic had flung himself to one side and, unwilling to take the time to unsling the rifle that hung across his shoulder, had drawn his pistol instead. Realizing the situation, he grinned and shook his head as he slipped the weapon back into its holster.

"What happened," Frank demanded, looking for a target, and Carson took Victoria's wrist and held up her injured hand.

"If you didn't want me to set this lady's pretty little finger, sir, you should have said something."

Holstering his own pistol, Frank asked, "You know the screaming trick too?" In his past, pre-Revolution life, Frank had been an EMT and martial artist as well as a cop, and he had used that technique often himself, as well as having it used on him on more than one occasion. With all the patient's energy focused on the scream, nearly all the pain of the bone-ends grinding together during the joint resetting was blocked out, leaving only the sore aftermath. Besides, the average person would most likely scream anyway when the things when back together, so it tended to save them the embarrassment.

"Learned it a long time ago, sir. Now if you'll excuse me, the lady needs further attention."

She needed it all right, but more emotionally than physically; Frank had almost lost Sammie more than

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once, and he knew the agony Victoria must be going through. Although it took a great effort of will, he forced his own suffering into submission for the moment, knowing it wouldn't last long. He stepped toward her, and she faced him, trembling. Most of it was her loss, but part of it was him. His eyes were like those of a hungry falcon she had seen once, not only ready but eager and looking for something to kill.

His eyes are so wrong! I've never seen him look that way before.

"I'm so sorry, Frank!" she managed, and in response, he gently took her in his arms and hugged her, holding her tightly against him.

"I'm sorry too, Vika, for you as well as for us. I know what he meant to you, and what you meant to him. I know it hurts, but be thankful you had him for at least a little while."

"I-I am, but it's just so hard!"

"Tell me about it," he said, and she nodded her understanding and dabbed at her eyes as they broke their embrace.

"I'm sorry...I have no right to complain, especially to you, after you and Sammie..." She brought her hand to her mouth as she choked and couldn't go on. Frank gently took her by the upper arms and looked at her lowered eyes.

"Look at me, Vika." When she hesitated, he gave her the gentlest of shakes, like waking a friend from a nap. "Look at me. You have every right to complain. We're your friends – we're practically family – and that's what families do for each other. You can lean on us as much as you want, as long as you don't mind it when we lean on you too, because we will....we are."

"Thank you. Is there anything I can do?"

"I hate to ask you – "

"Ask. *Please*."

He nodded his understanding.

She needs to do something, anything useful, that will occupy her mind and let her keep it together, while doing something to avenge the one she lost. Damn it, I know the feeling!

Realizing his facial muscles were twisting into a horrible grimace when he saw her expression, he forced them to relax. "I need someone to be my in-office liaison to the Russians, and to advise me on what I'm doing rightly or wrongly in regards to them before I do it. That was always John's department; he's dealt with your people much more than I have, and I don't want to alienate them."

Her unswollen eye widened.

"You'd...trust me to do that? A Russian?"

"John trusted you," he said, then shrugged, "and he didn't trust *anybody*."

"You're wrong, Frank; he trusted one man, and that was you. He told me once he even looked on you like a son." Seeing his hard, crazy eyes widen in surprise, she nodded briefly, confirming her statement. "He also told me about the attempted coup, and the things you had done for him. Even if I didn't love you and Sammie like my own family, I would still do this for Jonathon's sake."

Frank hugged her again, then patted her shoulder.

"Good, and you can rest assured, the feeling's mutual. As soon as you feel up to it, report to the war room."

"I'm up to it now. I'll – "

"You'll just hold up there, little lady," Carson broke in, "That's exactly what you're going to do until I get that eye checked out."

"Very well," she sighed, and Frank nodded his approval, turned, and entered the room, closing the door behind him.

He saw his wife standing there, one hand resting protectively on Sam's shoulder as he sat in the wheelchair, battered and bandaged and looking for all the world like Hell itself had just exploded in his face.

I reckon it did!

When Frank had told Victoria they were all practically family, he hadn't been lying, as evidenced by the fact that he bent down and embraced the man he loved and depended on like an older brother.

"Damn, I'm glad you made it!"

"Frank, I'm – "

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"No!" Frank cut him off sharply. "Don't say it! We're all sorry! We're sorry as hell, but right now I need the real you, the old Sam, right here beside me! I need your brain and your advice so we can make those dirty sons of bitches who did this even sorrier! Turn that sorrow into anger, and let it burn! Let it *burn, damn it!*"

Sam swallowed hard and nodded.

No matter how bad it is, friends don't refuse friends in need, and he needs me right now. Besides, I'm owed some payback too!

"Okay, now let's – " Even as he was speaking, in the very limit of his peripheral vision he saw one of the suspended ceiling tiles near the right corner move slightly. His wife and friend had their backs to it, and couldn't see it, and probably wouldn't have noticed if they had. He wasn't sure what it was, only that it was unknown, and right now, anything unknown was presumed hostile.

Pete Leach, LC Tarbox's personal assistant, was in agony. He had spent the last few minutes crouched precariously with one foot on a narrow steel beam and a shoulder wedged against a heating duct while he balanced himself by clinging to the support wires that held up the suspended ceiling. He wasn't in good physical shape and was more than a little tense to begin with, and everything was cramped; he knew he couldn't stay there much longer, but he couldn't go anywhere else either. He was trapped like a rat, which was a good description in more ways than one.

Tarbox had been good to him, no question about that, and he had remained loyal, but even loyalty has its limits. When Leach had been stepping out of a side hallway and had seen who was coming through the Confederate Building's front door with a heavily armed escort of angry Irregulars, he quickly realized two things: one, that everything had just gone straight to Hell in a handcart, and two, that his life was of more value to him at that moment than to his employer. Scurrying back to his office, his mind raced for a way to escape; he knew Tarbox's affairs intimately, and was under no illusions as to what Frank still being alive, and here, meant. No doubt the exits were already covered, but if he could just hide somewhere until things calmed down, maybe he could slip away later.

With the survival instinct of a born scavenger, he had climbed on top of his file cabinet to push one of the white textured acoustic tiles aside, then up into the suspended ceiling, hanging onto a support wire with one foot on a narrow steel beam while kicking the tile he had displaced back into position with the toe of his other shoe. Since then, he had been moving trough the building unseen, crawling over duct-work, laboriously making his way along the beams like a scrawny sloth, clinging to wires with bleeding hands, and choking on dust. He had just stopped to rest when he heard someone come into the room below him, and recognized their voices.

From Samantha's words, he knew Tarbox was already a goner, as would be anyone they caught associated with him, an association that definitely included Pete Leach. And yet, as he sat and listened, and heard that Frank Gore was on his way, his desperation gave birth to a fittingly desperate plan.

Both the Gores will in there alone with Wirtz; there's nothing separating them from me except these ceiling tiles. Edge and MacFie are dead; if I kill these three, there will be no more leaders, and then they'll have to let LC go. We can still win!

Careful to make no sound, he drew his high capacity 9mm automatic from its shoulder holster.

The others saw the change in Frank's gaze and demeanor and opened their mouths to ask, but he frantically waved them to silence as he continued to stare intently at the ceiling.

It's probably nothing, but...

But he couldn't quite convince himself of that.

"Come here for a second, Sammie; I need you to help me with this."

He didn't wait; he already had her hand and pulled her to him while drawing his .45 with the other. Pulling her close, he breathed as much as whispered the words in her ear.

"Under the desk – *now*!"

In his fear for her, he accompanied the hissed order with a desperate push that was almost a shove, and she instantly obeyed even while she was asking herself what the hell was going on. She ducked down as quickly

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as she was able in her condition, and seconds later, she had as much of herself as she could force in the compartment that her legs would have occupied if she were sitting there instead. She didn't have to be told to draw the .357 magnum from her purse; it was already in her hand, a cold steel six shot security blanket, as soon as she saw something was wrong.

As soon as he saw his wife was actually taking cover, Frank reached for his waistband at the small of his back with his free hand and drew his backup gun, a compact P10 .45, a gift from Edge, and passed it to a startled Sam. Gesturing with a nod of his head and a point of his muzzle, Frank indicated the ceiling once more, just as the tiles made a faint shifting once more. Sam was concussed, drugged and in pain, but he forced himself to concentrate. His eyes narrowed, and, seeing the way they were looking from his limited vantage point, understood that the danger was above. Catching Frank's eye, Samantha looked meaningfully towards the door, but her husband emphatically shook his head.

If he's after us, he mouthed silently, and Samantha had enough combat experience to guess the rest: *he's got an audible target when he hears that door open. Anyone in that doorway will be hit.*

As he watched the tiles, Frank listened just as intently, and his keen ears picked up a creak just long enough to get a fix on it.

Another time and place, Frank would have worried about who was up there, but not now; the time for worrying about such niceties had long passed. Besides, he wanted to kill something. He *needed* to kill something!

Snapping his muzzle in the direction of the sound, Frank began firing into the ceiling as fast as he could squeeze the trigger.

The people in the room below had suddenly quieted, and that worried Pete Leach. He was in the process of taking aim where he thought Frank Gore would be when a shot was fired from that very direction, and the bullet whined past the pointed tip of his nose and spanged off the beam he was holding onto, nearly making him lose his grip in panic.

Oh shit! They know I'm here! Ohshitshitshit!

He frantically began pulling the trigger.

After firing twice in rapid succession, Frank jumped to one side, several feet away from where he had started, and a bullet tore through the tiles above to slam into the floor near where he had been when he fired. He opened up again at the sound of the shot, and Sam started blasting away as well. Samantha was unable to get a fix on where the shots were coming from in her position.

Cynthia was the closest to the door, and thus was the first one through, machine pistol in hand; she had just managed to set one foot inside the room when Leach heard the door open and fired at the sound. There was a loud whack and the tiny bodyguard's chest bowed inward and her shoulders came forward as the impact knocked her spinning back into the hall to collapse against Platt, who was coming in right behind her. A second shot smashed into Platt's lower jaw at an angle, and he lost his rifle, jerked both hands up to his face, and went tumbling backwards.

At the sight of Cynthia being hit, an enraged Samantha jammed a foot against the front of the desk and heaved, pushing her swollen body far enough out from underneath to begin firing as well. Growling a stream of curses, she squeezed the trigger as fast as she could, the heavy hollow points ripping through he ceiling tiles like knives through paper. Smith paused long enough to grab the fallen Platt and Cynthia by a collar in each hand and yank them out of the way. Once they were clear, he covered at the edge of the doorframe, and, seeing if not quite understanding, he began firing three round bursts in more-or-less the same direction as everyone else, as did Vika, who snatched up Cynthia's Skorpion and joined him, and a veritable swarm of lead earnestly but blindly sought the unseen attacker as a snowstorm of acoustic tile fragments and dust filled the room.

Frank's slide racked open as he expended the last round in his clip, and, instead of reloading, he lunged for the heavier artillery of Platt's M16/203 lying on the blood-smeared floor beside Smith. Ignoring the rifle's trigger for the moment, his hand went to that of the grenade launcher beneath the barrel. Frank had given the

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order to load all launchers inside with anti-personnel canister rounds before entering the building, and he trusted it had been done when he fired it into the ceiling where he estimated the shooter to be. Forty millimeters worth of buckshot charge roared upward, sending tiles and pieces of dust flying, and shredding Pete Leach.

The body fell limply from the ceiling, its feet caught in the support wires, and ended up hanging head-down and bloody into the room below like a butchered steer. Samantha instantly pointed and squeezed, and the hammer fell on an empty chamber.

"Is he dead?" she called out even as she popped the cylinder with one hand and pulled her speed loader with the other. Frank responded by sliding his right hand back to the assault rifle's pistol grip, slipping his finger into the trigger guard, and putting a quick burst through Leach's head, blowing most of it across the floor and against the opposite wall.

"He is now! Smith, Sam; cover us! I think he was the only one but make sure there are no more, just in case I'm wrong! Medic!"

"Here!" Carson called out, trying to pull the moaning Platt's hands away from his shattered face. Samantha was already on her way to Cynthia, but, with her belly in the way, by the time she knelt down beside the girl, Frank was already there, with Victoria not far behind.

The bodyguard was curled on her left side in a fetal position, gasping for air that wouldn't seem to come, her hands clasped over her left upper chest.

"Roll her onto her back!" Frank ordered, his voice overlaid by a hollow synthetic rasp as he jerked his Entrek fighting knife from its Kydex sheath. By that time, Billy had arrived on the run with a shotgun in one hand, his pants undone and being held up with the other due his abrupt departure from the restroom, and Hodges and dozens more men were pouring into the hallway. Gesturing with the point of the nine-inch blade, Frank shouted, "He was in the ceiling! Knock every tile down and make sure there are no more! Watch yourselves!"

With that, he turned his attention back to Cynthia even as the men began obeying his order, half of them pulling down tiles while the rest covered them with safeties off and fingers on the triggers. Samantha rolled the girl over just as Carla, hearing the gunfire and suspecting she might be needed, arrived. Seeing her daughter was one of the casualties, she screamed, "No!" and Frank shouted at her.

"Damn it, Carla, we don't have time! You're a nurse! Get down here and help me now!" As soon as she came within reach, he emphasized his order by snagging the front of her blood-stained scrub shirt with the powerful fingers of his left hand and yanking her down on her knees.

Samantha had never seen Frank treat a woman that way, but she had to admit it worked. In an, instant the weeping Carla was kneeling beside them and working out of sheer instinct, trying to save her daughter's life.

Frank thought he was beyond grief by now, but as he looked at the tiny girl who had shared their lives for so long, he realized he was wrong.

Please, God, not this one too! No more!

"Pull her hands away!" he shouted, and between Samantha, Victoria and Carla, they managed, all of them talking calmly to her the whole time.

"Calm down, Cynthia! Just calm down and let us see!"

Cynthia did her best to obey despite the pain and audible wheezing for the breath that wouldn't seem to come, and as quickly as they got her hands clear, Frank cut the web gear of her combat harness on that side, then, taking the collar of her shirt, slipped his blade beneath it and sliced to her left, sliding the razor sharp edge through the cloth and bra strap with almost no resistance. Pulling everything aside, he were more than a little surprised at the fact that there was no blood, only a long vertical bruise that was getting blacker by the minute. It was darkest over her collarbone, but it made a clear, inch-wide line all the way down across her nipple; the entirety of her left breast was already showing the discolored evidence of impact as well.

"What in the hell..." Frank began, Carla yelled, "Oh thank God!" and Samantha smiled with relief as she stroked the girl's hair and told her, "I knew you were tough, but I didn't know you were bullet proof."

With a frown, Frank reached for the cut harness and examined it, then nodded.

"The knife Rob gave her – the Gerber Mark II – stopped the bullet. Look at the sheath." The black cloth

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scabbard strapped to the suspender of her harness had a hole directly in its center, and when Frank drew the knife, the double-edged blade came out in two pieces, broken in half by the shot. The bullet had fragmented on impact with the hardened steel, and the bits of lead and copper remaining were embedded in the suspender. "Rob must be working for God now, because he just saved your life." Dropping the ruined blade, he reached out and tugged a fold of cloth up far enough to cover the nipple of the girl's exposed left breast. "Let's check your collarbone...Are you all right?"

Much to their surprise, Cynthia began sobbing like her heart would break, and Frank eased up on the already gentle pressure of his examination.

"Sorry; I know it hurts, but – "

"He broke my knife!" she wailed, "Rob gave that to me!"

Before even her mother could do more than pat her hand, Frank leaned over top of her and hugged her, pressing her head into his shoulder as best he could without moving her.

"I know, Cynthia, I know. You need to remember, though, that it's saved your life twice, and that's the reason Rob gave it to you in the first place, right?"

"Y-yes..."

"All right, now you just remember that, because I'm sure Rob's damned happy about it. Now, let your mother and I check you..."

"I can do that, sir."

Glancing over his shoulder to find Carson behind him, he asked, "What about Platt?"

"He didn't make it; either the bullet or a fragment of bone cut his carotid artery," he said grimly.

Frank swore violently, then nodded and stood up, bouncing to his feet with anger and adrenaline. He looked at Cynthia wincing as both her mother and the medic probed her, and at Platt, all of nineteen and with a quarter of his face blown away, lying in an enormous puddle of his own blood. All the tenderness that had been there a moment ago instantly vanished, and the orders came quick and precise.

"Sammie, Sam, Vika, Billy; you're with me. Hodges, detail another man to provide security here until they're done, and have the rest sweep this building from top to bottom, including the ceilings, duct work, and any other place a man could possibly fit. Start at the war room and work outward, but don't take any unnecessary chances." He turned to glare at Leach's body still hanging from the ceiling and dripping what little was left of its brains onto the carpet. "If you find anyone hiding, kill him!"

"Yes sir!" Hodges replied, although he had fully intended to do just that anyway, orders or no orders.

Once her mother pinned her ruined shirt together, Cynthia insisted on walking under her own power back to the war room, and they let her, but only after putting her left arm in a sling. Carson refused to let her up until that was done; he suspected the girl's collarbone, and possibly a couple of ribs were cracked but not broken, and there was no question but that she was severely bruised. Lower down, her breast had acted like an airbag and had absorbed much of the impact, and it showed; her boob was already turning black, and was starting to hurt almost as much as her bones...and her pride. Not over her brief nudity – she had lived in the close quarters of guerrilla camps far too long to worry too much over that – but because she hadn't even gotten a shot off. She was embarrassed as hell, but much more so, she was frightened that she had failed, and Sammie could have easily died.

Once she arrived, Samantha looked at her, smiled, and said, "Thank you."

"For what?" she asked bitterly, "Running in and getting myself shot like a dumb-ass when you needed me most?"

"For drawing his fire away from Frank and Sam, so we could finally kill him." She shook her head and blew out her breath as she guided her off to one side. "If you and poor Platt hadn't come in when you did..." She paused, stepping around one of the rapidly growing stacks of ceiling tiles the Irregulars were piling up prior to taking them out in the hallways to get them out of the way, and coughing into her fist at the dust the process had stirred up. "He'd have probably gotten at least one of us." Samantha suddenly clamped her hand to her mouth and choked off a sob, and Cynthia instantly had her elbow with her good hand.

"What is it?"

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"If...if I had lost you in the process, or lost..." Throwing her arms around the startled bodyguard's neck, pulling her to her and holding her so tightly she made her wince from the pain of her wound, Sammie whispered, "I can't stand to lose anyone else I care about, Cynthia! Not now! I just...can't!"

Cynthia returned her embrace and cried some more tears of her own; she knew just how she felt.

Frank turned toward them.

"Cynthia, you did a great job, but I need to reassign you temporarily. Sammie and I have Billy and all of General Hodges' men around us, so I've got a special assignment for you. I want you to report to Mike; you're to be his personal assistant and bodyguard until this immediate crisis is over. You know best how he works and what he needs done, and I know that's where you both wish you were anyway. Besides, you've got a vested interest in keeping your boyfriend alive."

It was hard to tell who looked more surprised at his revelation: Carla, Samantha, or Cynthia herself. All three stood there with open mouths, and then Carla and Samantha turned to look at the girl.

"How…" Cynthia paused, swallowing, and then tried again. "How did you find out?"

"Because I'm your commander, and, like I've told you before, it's my business to know what the people I care about and depend on most are up to."

"How long have you known?"

"I've known since I was still doing rehab for my wounds, almost a year and a half ago. Now, go on; he may never show it, but I know he's heard what happened by now, and he'll be worried to death about you. If you're with him, that's one less thing he has to think about. Now scoot; that's an order."

Cynthia hugged him with her good arm, then smiled her gratitude as she let him go.

"Yes, sir; scooting, sir."

Her mother was opening her mouth to say something, but by that time, Cynthia was past her and through the door, almost running.

"He's a good man," Frank reassured her, "one of the best I've ever known. They shared a grief that nobody else has, and it brought them together. They understand one another, and that makes for a good match."

Carla shook her head. "It seems so obvious now, I can't believe I never noticed it!"

"Same here," Samantha said, looking at her husband, "Why didn't you say something?"

"I did. I told Cynthia she ought to find someone, and she did."

"No, I mean to me!"

He shrugged. "I figured Cynthia or Mike would tell anyone they thought ought to know. I didn't think that was my place to discuss their business."

Carla looked meaningfully at Samantha.

"You can sure tell he's not a woman!"

Samantha chuckled: not a laugh, but a single, almost inaudible coughing sound. It lasted less than a second before the pain returned and crushed it under its heel.

Mike sat like an owl in the darkness, lit only by the bank of computer screens before him, his fingers flying staccato as machinegun fire while he tapped the keys. His eyes, flicking back and forth from monitor to monitor, held no more emotion than steel ball bearings, and he picked up the Beretta lying by the keyboard when he heard the light knock.

"Come."

Cynthia slipped inside and closed the door behind her, and Mike put his pistol aside when he saw who it was.

"Hey," she said, "How are you doing?"

Spreading his hands, he half-shrugged.

"As well as can be expected, I guess: like hell. You?"

"Same here. I...I…well, Frank's known about us all along. He said that, since Sammie's going to be with him, he's temporarily assigning me to you."

"Then I owe him. I'm glad you came, because I wanted to see you too. I heard what happened, and it scared

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the hell out of me just how close I came to losing you."

"I'm okay."

"How badly does it hurt?"

She tried a nonchalant shrug that included her injured left side, and winced as the incoming air of her gasp hissed between her teeth, and he frowned when she said, "Not too bad," as soon as she got her breath back.

"Liar," he accused her gently. "Come here and let me see."

She obeyed, and stood compliantly before him, assisting by carefully moving the sling containing her arm while he pulled apart the flaps of her ruined shirt to expose her breast and upper chest. He studied the bruised flesh for a moment, shaking his head, and she could swear she saw tears gathering in the corners of his eyes when he raised them to her.

"You poor baby. That was too close!"

"I'll be okay. It just...hurts a little."

"Would you like me to kiss it and make it better?"

She managed a little smile and a slight nod.

"Yes, I think I'd like that very much."

As he softly moved his lips across her injuries, she reflected that the gentle act did actually seem to make things better, inside if not outside.

No more words were said when he pulled away; both of them knew there was no time for anything else right now, but neither of them were ready to stop just yet. They settled for a compromise, and, after Cynthia re-buttoned her ruined shirt, she climbed into the lap of the man she loved while he sat in his wheelchair. They held each other tightly, her with one arm because her other was injured by war, and he with one arm because the other hand was extended, fighting that same war as his fingers danced across the keyboard, sending and receiving information that made all the difference between life and death for millions. Still, it was comforting to both, and in the middle of Hell they would take all the comfort they had to give each other in the few spare minutes they had to give it. With him, she could let her hard mask slip, and she did, and soaked the shoulder of his shirt with the tears for the lost she had been holding back.

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CHAPTER 59

The Columbia Patriot, Special Edition

...While Columbia and the Confederacy mourns its dead, most of our militiamen, Sailors and Marines are already headed for the battle. Some are steaming toward the Gulf aboard the Semmes Carrier Group under Admiral Montgomery, while others are pushing westward behind General 'Lucky Charlie' Carnes, and with still more set to follow, in an army so great it looks as if the whole Confederacy is on the move. Besides military vehicles and civilian trains, planes, and commercial trucks, fleets of hundreds if not thousands of vans and pickups have arrived as well, brought in by their civilian owners to be packed with troops, all headed west in a seemingly unbroken stream of traffic, with rifles in their hands, fire in their eyes, and righteous anger in their hearts. The Patriot's heart goes with them, as does most of its staff; every man of fighting age and a few well past it have already left our offices to answer the call of a greater duty. We ask that all of Columbia bear with us during this period we'll be short-staffed, and join us in our prayers for their safety and for victory...

The Southern Historical Observer

Even as the war in the west had barely begun, another war was already being fought in the shadows, both officially and unofficially. Officially, warrants were issued for the arrest of those traitors who had conspired with LC Tarbox. Dozens had already been arrested, many as they tried to flee the Confederacy. Hundreds more, however, were not so fortunate; fired by anger at what had been done and, in most cases, operating independently, several militia units and private citizens took matters into their own hands. By the morning after the Columbia attack, bodies began to be discovered hanging along the streets and roads or floating in the rivers, shot or killed in some other way. A handful of those sought managed to escape to the North, but many more simply disappeared...

The bloody sun was clawing its way over the horizon, its first scarlet rays lighting stark ruins of Columbia's heart. Women and old men, and even a few children, faces blackened and dirty, spared no more than a glance at it out of bloodshot eyes filled with grief and fury, or glazed over from fatigue, and from having seen far too much. There were still plenty more injured to be dug out, but more often what was being passed along out of the T-shaped crater and out of the crumpled buildings to either side were bodies and parts of bodies, chunks of torn flesh and shattered bone, most of which were unrecognizable as ever having been human. People wept or prayed or cursed under their breath when they had the breath to spare, all of them shadows without reflection; every window, every piece of glass in the downtown had shattered in the concussion. A platoon of 1st Columbia Irregulars were busy nailing plywood over the windows of the Confederate Building, to keep out the weather and prevent any enemy outside from getting a clear shot at anyone within. The noise of their hammers and saws filled the air as Frank reentered the war room after taking the call to the back office, set the phone down, and turned to the group.

"That was TJ; he added his yea vote to Congress' decision on emergency powers. He also relayed Japan's thanks for taking care of their ambassador and our "apprehension" of his attackers. Their parliament is in emergency session right now to decide what to do about the Mexican attack."

"Japan's constitution forbids it from waging war..." Hardy began, but Lannigan cut him off.

"Considering what's at stake here, that might not matter. They've got too much money invested in us, and too much potential from an alliance with us, to just let us go by the wayside...I hope."

Frank's eyes flicked to him.

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"What's your prediction?"

"I think we can rely on some quiet aid, at the very least, but it wouldn't surprise me to see a contingent of anywhere up to a few thousand of their soldiers arriving at the Baja Peninsula, hopefully taking some of the pressure off our people and linking up with them once we reach the Pacific. Ostensibly they'll be observers, but in reality they'll fight beside us. Not only are they going to want a hunk of Mexico's ass, but they'll want to make sure we remember who our friends are once the whole thing is over. They can't afford to have Russia get too far ahead of them in our affections. Besides, they've been wanting to climb back onto their rightful place on the international stage for a long time, and this will be their excuse, and a chance to get their feet wet again."

"Makes sense…especially since I gave TJ a little something to pass on to sweeten the pot," Frank told him before turning to Mike, ignoring their curious looks. "What's the latest word from the Russians?"

"The most important thing is that they intend to keep doing what they've been doing: providing satellite data. They're also flying some additional assistance in to us, in the form of some more Spetsnaz commandos, and a battle group appears to be heading in our general direction, certainly with at least a brigade of regular troops – probably more. They haven't officially announced anything, but..."

"I get the picture."

I've got it, all right. Russia and Japan will help us, but there will be a price for it down the road, and it's a price we'll have no choice but to pay. I guess I'll just have to make the best bargain I can!

"I've got some other news as well; Tarbox is spilling his guts as fast as he can. He named two lawyers who had been bribing him on behalf of a business consortium, and they caught one of them in Nashville. He's talking even faster than Tarbox, and we know who they were working for."

Mike went ahead, naming off several well-known businesses, including oil companies, electric companies, two giant mega-mart corporations, three fast-food chains, and a number of banking houses, real estate companies, theme parks, movie studios, and even a famous auto racing consortium. By the time he finished, most of the men in the room were swearing violently.

"Was half the damned South behind this?" Sam snarled, and Frank shook his head.

"No just the leaders and controlling stockholders of those companies...*all* of whom I expect to see arrested ASAP, and all their corporate and personal assets seized pending trial, including the companies involved. An overseer will be appointed to each one to keep it running in trust in the meantime, preferably a man of known loyalty in middle management, if possible. Get someone to write up the order and I'll sign it."

"I'm on it," he heard Samantha saying in the background.

"That's going to give our enemies a lot of propaganda to use against us..." Hardy began, but was interrupted by Samantha.

"Don't worry; I've got it covered." Even as she spoke her fingers were hammering away at a keyboard. "You did say you intend to bring them to trial?" This last was directed at Frank, and her tone made it abundantly clear it wouldn't break her heart either way.

"All of those that the militias and law enforcement bring in alive. From the reports I'm getting so far, I can't say for sure how many that will be."

"Good enough." Her fingers kept tapping, faster and faster. "Unless someone specifically tells me the others are dead for certain, they'll be listed as at large and being sought, and we urge them to turn themselves in." She paused. "Should we offer a reward? We might get more of them alive that way."

"As far as I'm concerned, I wouldn't spend a dime to save every one of them."

Samantha nodded her approval; after what had happened, she agreed 100%.

"All right, then."

No sooner than she finished the sentence, Frank was paged to the phone again, and was surprised to find Benjamin Begay on the line. Although he had only met him once, he had spoken to the Navajo lawyer, tribal politician, and Indian activist on several occasions by phone, and the CNAN Defense Forces had frequently joined the Confederate Marines in joint war games.

"What can I do for you, Mr. Begay?"

"I may be able to do something for you. I hear you're having a little problem down South of here."

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"I had assumed the CNAN was already with us." Frank's voice grew dangerously icy, and Begay rushed to reassure him that he had misunderstood his point. He knew a misunderstanding at this stage could quite literally be fatal; the attorney had the distinct feeling that, if the Indians betrayed the South at the time they were needed most, Mexico had *better* win, because what was about to happen to the Mexicans would be nothing compared to the Southerners' response against unfaithful friends.

It would make Wounded Knee look like a Sunday school picnic!

"Oh, we are, along with the Apaches and even those damned Hopi neighbors of ours; our southernmost forces are already engaged, and the Apaches are really stuck into 'em right now, especially after President Chato was killed in Columbia, and then what the Mexicans did down there on the Tohono Res."

Frank knew the reservation in question, along with a few outlying districts, was the home of about twenty-thousand members of that tribe.

"What? I knew Mr. Chato was at the Capital, but we've had no word from the Tohonos since the invasion began."

"Let's put it this way; there are very few Tohonos left to give any word. It's been a massacre; men, women, kids. Some made it out, driving north, and there's probably more hiding out in the brush, but still…"

"I'm sorry for your people's loss, Mr. Begay."

"Thank you, but it's to be expected. We've were all enemies of the Mexicans long before you White men came along. My question is, would you like to have some reinforcements?"

"What do you mean?"

"I've been contacted by the Indian Nationalist Movement, and representatives of several Indian nations, including Lakota, Cheyenne, Blackfoot, and Absaroka: all outside the Confederacy, and some of them even from Canada. Under certain conditions, they will be willing to come down and throw tens of thousands of men into the fight, a lot of 'em with military experience."

Frank pursed his lips in careful thought before answering.

"What conditions?"

"General, do you plan on stopping at the Mexican border?"

"What do you think?"

"I think you're going to kick their spic asses and take everything from them you can."

"I can't discuss plans over the phone, but that's not an unreasonable assumption."

"If they help you, we – all the Indian peoples as a group, I mean – want the Mexican State of Sonora as part of the CNAN."

"Just a moment," Frank told him, moving to the map on the wall. "Why?"

"Land of our own, part of the Confederacy of Native American Nations, exclusively for Native Americans that all our nations can benefit from, complete with ports. We're tired of living hand to mouth on the damned res. We want something real for ourselves, for our race. It's time for my people to finally move forward into the 21st Century, and we need a real country to do it."

That was something Frank could readily understand, and he mentally sifted the possibilities.

"Have your reinforcements cross into your lands if possible, where you can arrange them yourselves and check for spies. If you can provide us with not less than twenty-five thousand additional Indian troops on top of the ones we already have within 72 hours, operating as militia under direct Indian command, subject otherwise only to the overall Confederate military command, and they give it all they've got, you can have all of Sonora we manage to take below a line running from the mouth of the Asuncion River to Nogales as Indian land. You all can sort out which nation gets what part yourselves."

Unseen, Begay nodded on the other end of the phone. He thought
Frank intended to take the Baja and the Sea of Cortez in order to give the Confederacy a Pacific port – otherwise he'd be a fool – and his insistence on the maintenance of a broad northern corridor confirmed his suspicions. What surprised him was what little bargaining Frank had done. It made him wonder if the Secretary of Defense – President now – had anticipated this. Suddenly he realized Frank was talking again.

"Have your commander network directly with General Lannigan. One more thing; this place, whatever you choose to call it, is not going to be a reservation and it's not going to be a new totally independent country. It's

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either going to be an autonomous territorial protectorate like you have now, or else it's going to be a State, with full representation and responsibility within the Confederate Government. Either way, it's going to be tied to the Confederacy."

"I don't know if they'll go for that. A lot of us don't care for White man's government."

"You know how the CSA will work following the election; you'll be governing yourselves within your own borders, pretty much any way you see fit. The form of government we're developing is not going to be a burden to the individual once it's in place. The responsibility for running it will be yours; this is not going to be another welfare state."

"Well, I don't know…"

"We're not winning a country for somebody else that has the potential to become an international security nightmare right on our own border. This condition is non-negotiable, Mr. Begay. Please consult with your people as to whether they'd rather be governed by us or the Mexicans and then call me back when you have an answer. I don't have time to dicker."

"You drive a hard bargain."

"I drive an honest one."

He heard the Navajo chuckle.

"We know; that's why we're dealing with you. We accept, and I'll keep you posted. Oh, one more thing…"

"Yes?"

"We want Tiburon Island and Puerto Penasco too."

Frank's lips actually twitched in amusement for just a second at the man's incessant wheeling and dealing attitude, even now...especially now. It brought a touch of real humanity to the whole thing, even if it did come complete with warts and all.

"Tiburon will be in your territory; not Puerto Penasco. The island will be better for that giant casino resort complex I figure you're planning anyway."

Begay chuckled again, at himself this time, because Frank had figured out what he was up to.

"Oh well; you can't fault me for trying."

"Goodbye, Mr. Begay," Frank told him before pressing the disconnect button.

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DAY 1095

CHAPTER 60

The North Texas Report Special Bulletin

As of noon today, the main Mexican advance into Texas has been halted at Kyle, just south of Austin by a combined force of Naval Air, Confederate Marines, and Texas and Oklahoma Militia Forces. To the west, they have been driven out of Coleman, and fierce fighting is still raging in Big Spring and Odessa. Governor King, on the ground and having taken direct command of the Lone Star Militia, had this to say.

"*Even though we have stopped the Mexicans, this is no time to rest; this war has just begun! After the pitiful stories I've heard from the thousands and thousands of refugees, stories of robbery, rape, mutilation, and murder, this is no longer a question of driving these barbarians off our land; this is a question of not letting them get away! They came here wanting Texas land, and I'm going to give it to them! There's a little six-foot plot waiting for each and every one of those sons of bitches to fill!"*

"Frank."

Frank jerked his head up guiltily at the sound of his name; he had been almost seventy-two hours without sleep, and had dozed off in his chair right there in the middle of all the hubbub of his central command. Obviously, or at least hopefully, nothing important enough had happened to make it worth waking him until now. Glancing at the clock, then squinting at it in an effort to make his blurry eyes focus, he saw it was almost six in the afternoon, and he had been out for almost two hours, just enough to feel like Hell.

"Frank!" Samantha shook his shoulder again insistently, bringing him to full wakefulness. She knew her husband's propensity for violent nightmares – they were just like her own – so she stood to one side to wake him up.

"Huh...what is it?"

"General Juan Velásquez of the People's Army of the Republic of Chiapas is on the phone."

"Chiapas?" It took it about a second to click; Velásquez was the current Supreme Commander of the Chiapan guerrilla forces that had been engaged in a war with the Mexican Government for decades. Frank dug the heels of his palms into his eyes and twisted, trying to rub the cobwebs out. The Mexican State of Chiapas was in its own war of secession, just like the Southerners had been until recently.

"On my way," he said, straightening himself up and standing to get the blood flowing. He snagged a cup of coffee – he didn't know whose it was and didn't particularly care – and took a big slug of the bitter lukewarm liquid to clear his throat before taking the phone and thumbing the speaker button to 'on.'

"*Buenos dias, Generalissmo.*"

"General Gore, I have an offer for you."

Good, Frank thought to himself, *at least he's not beating around the bush.*

"What is that, sir?"

"If you will recognize Chiapas as an independent nation, and give us your promise not to invade our territory, we will step up our own actions against the Mexican troops here, which will tie up many of their forces."

"One moment, please." Putting the caller on hold, Frank glanced around the room. Sam, General Lannigan and Admiral Hardy all nodded their agreement, and he pressed the button again. "I'll make the announcement within the hour and, as long as you hold up your end of the bargain, we'll stay off Chiapan soil entirely."

"Excellent!" he exclaimed, "It's good to have friends you can trust. I hope our friendship will continue into

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the future."

"As do I, General."

Frank's wish was sincere, but his belief was not. Something in the Chiapan's tone activated his cop instinct, and told him that all was not quite as it seemed.

In fact, it wasn't. Even as General Velasquez hung up the phone, his Chinese military advisor, Colonel Wong Lee, smiled and nodded his approval before getting up to go send a message back to his own country. China was about to expand its operations into the Americas at the invitation of the paranoid Chiapan Rebels, who wanted them there as an insurance policy against both the Mexicans and the Confederates, no matter who ultimately won or lost. If Mexico lost, it would certainly avenge itself on what it would call a traitor state, and if the Confederacy won…well, there was no telling if the Southerners would keep their word. Besides, the Chinese were their friends, and had been supplying arms to the Marxist guerrillas there for years.

Colonel Lee carefully kept his face stereotypically inscrutable despite the difficulty in suppressing his glee. Although, of course, not privy to the highest decision-making levels of the People's Republic of China, he had a feeling that the Chiapans would come to regret their invitation, once they found their house guests wouldn't be leaving quite as soon as they expected. They would probably also be surprised to learn that the Chinese were not about to be content simply with their little jungle state; instead, the Colonel knew that the logical thing to do would be to extend China's new territory across the narrow strip of Campeche, all the way to Isla Del Carmen and the bay of Laguna De Terminos on the Gulf of Mexico, raising the strategic value of their already impressive coup by orders of magnitude. From there, they would extend their influence up and down both coasts, beginning, expanding, and eventually solidifying their economic and political grip on all of Latin America.

The corners of his thin-lipped mouth twitched imperceptibly.

Who's going to stop us? These upstart Confederates?

US News Service

Elements of the United States 37th Armor Regiment, reformed after the war with the Southern rebel states and stationed near Yuma, California, mutinied yesterday and fled to Mexico with their tanks and other armored vehicles. No details are available at this time, but it has been speculated that most of the AWOL unit are either Mexican nationals or Latinos born in the US, and committed this act out of desperation to help Mexico fight off the invading Confederates.

Washington was quick to condemn the action. "While their zeal to do right by their people is perhaps understandable," President Roberts said in an emergency address, "mutiny and desertion are capital crimes, particularly when they have the potential to involve the United States in a conflict in which we are and intend to remain strictly neutral." He assured the Confederate Government that the event was completely without either US knowledge or consent, that the mutineers would be punished to the fullest extent of the law, and further called on the Mexican government to immediately extradite the wayward units, and to return all the equipment in their possession, reportedly at least several dozen tanks and armored vehicles…

General Lannigan's aide had just read the news report aloud, and the room was very quiet as Frank digested what he had just heard before turning to the General. Everyone in the room saw through the plainly transparent story of mutiny to the United States plan behind it, and it was so obvious it was not worth pointing out.

"What would Patton have done?"

Lannigan grinned without much humor.

"He would have slammed into them and kicked their asses!"

Frank turned back to the map.

"That's exactly what we're going to do. Notify the US that we realize that these are neither US nor Mexican

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soldiers or legal combatants in any sense of the word, but criminals and mutineers, and will be treated accordingly, as they are not under the protection of the Geneva Convention. Notify our forward commanders of this as well; all captured mutineers may be dealt with in the field at their discretion."

He said it with a lot more confidence than he felt, but there was no choice now. The Confederates hadn't counted on main battle tanks entering the war on the other side, but they had always done what they had to do, and they had to do this, and do it quickly, no matter what the cost. He just hoped they *could* do it.

Frank knew without question where they would set up; there was only one logical place. At the very head of the Sea of Cortez, near the mouth of the Colorado River, was a choke point about seventy-five miles wide just west of San Luis. The mutineers' armor and whatever other forces the Mexicans could pull out of the northern Baja or western Sonora would set up there, where the US border – Southern California – would be their northern flank, one the Confederates would dare not penetrate.

Then there were the Mexican forces in Arizona to consider. The combined Marines, Arizona Militia and reinforced CNAN Defense Forces had brought the advance there to a halt at Phoenix before finally forcing them to retreat back the way they had come after some brutal house-to-house fighting that had destroyed a substantial portion of the city. The Mexicans were currently holding near Interstate 8, down but not out, and certainly capable of falling back to the southern Arizona border to launch a flank attack on the Confederates when they attempted to take the San Luis area. They would have to be neutralized first.

"Admiral, I need some major air-to-ground power on this area ASAP." Frank pointed at the area of the map sandwiched between the Interstate and Mexican border, and waited until Hardy nodded, then said, "General, I need any Marines and militia you can spare as a blocking force between Yuma and Sonora, enough to cover any likely routes to the south before Lucky Charlie and company arrive."

"I don't have any to spare, sir."

"That's not acceptable." Frank sighed. "How many do we have that are not directly involved in combat in either the westward or Gulf Coast pushes?"

"Thousands of militiamen, but they're not first line troops. All of them are either men too old for the militia, or kids too young."

"And all of them volunteered to fight anyway. In the Revolution, some of the bravest, most effective fighters we had didn't meet the age requirements either. Besides, these are the only troops we have that are fresh. Pick your spots and start ferrying them in on C-130s with all the ammunition they can carry, and tell them to dig in like a tick and hold. We have to secure Charlie's northern flank!"

He still didn't know if it would be enough, but it was the only choice he had, so he was going with it. He hoped the Russians and Japanese would send some forces to the Baja to take some of the pressure off, in fact, he thought they would, but he couldn't count on it.

Then it clicked; he recalled a seemingly minor detail from one of Mike's intelligence briefings months ago, about feelers sent out by another would-be power that they didn't have the ability to help at that time, and pieces began snapping into place in his mind as his plan finally came together. His teeth bared in a snarling smile of triumph that startled everyone in the room, he abruptly spun on his heel and strode into Mike's office at a fast pace, not even bothering to knock. Before the door closed behind him, the people in the war room heard him demanding an immediate secure connection to TJ Ashby, and calling for figures that seemed to have nothing at all to do with the war itself.

He needed them immediately, because he knew he would be getting a call soon, and he needed to be ready.

"Cynthia, on behalf of the First Columbia Irregulars, I have something for you."

Standing in the doorway of Mike's command center while Frank was inside with Mike, she looked at what the big man handed her, then took it, and her eyes widened as she ran her fingers over the object.

"That's...my knife." She recognized it because she had modified the grip, and it felt like an old friend in her hand. Still, that blade had been snapped in two, broken beyond repair when it stopped the bullet that would have killed her. "How?"

"It's not rocket science," Hodges told her. "One of the Irregulars who insists on remaining nameless had

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one just like it, so he swapped out the blade and put it on yours for you. The grip and the rest of it's still the same, so it's still the same knife Colonel Johnson gave you. We thought the world of him, and he thought the world of you. You were part of him, the closest thing he had to a daughter, and he would have wanted us to do this."

"Thanks." She started to choke up a little. "I-I don't know what to say."

The big Skinhead grinned.

"Just try not to get shot in this one, okay?"

"Okay!" She abruptly gave him a hug, and Hodges patted her back and grinned, even as he reminded himself that he was going to have to replace his knife as soon as he got the chance.

"Frank?"

Even if he hadn't known who was on the phone, he would have recognized the Russian Prime Minister's voice anywhere. This was the call he had been waiting for, and he was careful not to let the excitement reveal itself in his voice.

"Yes, Dmitri; what can I do for you?"

"It's what I can do for you. First, you might be interested in the Chinese battle group that's on its way to Chiapas right now."

"Chinese?" Then what the Chiapans had pulled clicked in his head. "Those idiots! Do they realize what they've done?"

"No, but I suspect they eventually will, once it's too late."

"And it goes without saying that they'll secure the mouth of the Cortez as well. Damn it! There's no way we can get there in numbers before they arrive!"

"How badly do you want the Sea of Cortez?"

"Badly."

"We have a battle group of our own complete with a troop carrier in the Pacific right now, and we can be there in twenty-four hours, beating the Chinese by a day and a half. We can use the assassination of our ambassador as an excuse. We can attack the southern Baja Peninsula, seal off the Sea of Cortez, and wipe out the Mexican naval and coastal forces in that area, taking the pressure off your push. The Chinese won't want to confront us directly; they'll be content with Chiapas for the time being."

Frank didn't miss the use of the word "can" rather than "will," and knew there would be a price to be paid for that invaluable assistance. Still, although had been hoping for this, praying for this, he hadn't known for sure it would come, but he had been laying his plans in case it did.

"I'll do it, but under these conditions. How badly do you want the long-term lease on that warm water base in the Sea of Cortez you're about to ask me for?"

The Russian couldn't help but laugh. The Southerner was an absolute pleasure to deal with.

"As you said, badly."

"All right; here is what I propose."

When he finished, the Prime Minister exclaimed, "You're insane! Do you know what you're asking?"

Frank knew, and told him so, and, as he outlined it over the next hour, if the Russian leader had been shocked at the short-term proposition, he was absolutely stunned at the earth-shaking scope and implications of the Southerner's slightly longer-term goal.

Opportunities like this…the risk…but my God, the benefits!

The Prime Minster had been a warrior in his time, a member of the Spetsnaz elite, a man of action, who understood the value of daring greatly. Still, if any other man had proposed what Frank just had, he would have given an unequivocal "No!" But this wasn't another man. The Russian leader not only knew Frank personally, but had made a point of studying him. The risks were great, the national and international turmoil unimaginable…but the benefits! Those, he could imagine very well, and, if successful, they would be beyond his wildest dreams. He knew his history, and knew that it was seldom a leader got to stand on the brink of such greatness that it would literally change the world.

"I suppose I can't let you go mad by yourself, my friend; I'm in. Let's make the call."

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"Good Lord, Frank! What the hell did you just do?"

Looking at Sam with steel-hard eyes from his chair in the private office where he had summoned his friend, he answered, "What I had to."

"What were you thinking?"

"I was thinking that I intend to win."

"But – "

"I had a choice, Sam. There's a Chinese battle group steaming for Mexico right now, heading straight for Chiapas and the Baja."

Sam gaped like a stranded fish. This was not a scenario he had pictured, and as the implications dawned on him, he found he was at a loss for words.

"Those fool Chiapans invited them in. I say 'fools,' because you know as well as I do that, once the Chinese get a foothold in the Western Hemisphere, they'll never leave. I can live with them being there – I've got no choice – but if they get to the Baja and the Sea of Cortez before we do, they've just limited our country's possibilities to the nth degree. We have to have the Cortez, but we can't fight China and win, and they know that as well as we do. If we're faced with the choice of a head-to-head fight with them over anything but Dixie proper or the territory we now hold, we'll have to back down. I can't sacrifice the country for something we don't even have yet, no matter how badly we need it. With the Mexican bottleneck forming at San Luis, there is no way we can get the number of troops there to solidify our position before they arrive, and I won't let the lives of my men who have already died trying to reach it be wasted." He paused, fiddling with a pencil, rolling it back and forth between his fingers. "On the other hand, I can't guarantee China won't go to war with us over something *we* already have. Nothing personal, as far as they're concerned; they're an expanding nation, and we're in their way. Plus we have resources they want; I'll be happy to trade with them, but I can't risk them getting the idea it might be cheaper in the long run for them to just take it, because we're not strong enough to stop them."

"And that's where the Russians come in," Sam said quietly, and Frank nodded.

"And the Japanese."

Sam's brows shot upward in surprise.

"What?"

"That was part of my conditions for accepting their help. I put TJ on it before Dmitri ever called, and he got unofficial, tentative approval. We're both entering into a formal alliance with Japan."

"But…that's impossible! Russia – well, the Soviet Union – never signed a peace treaty with Japan! They're still technically at war with each other over the Kurile Islands that Russia holds."

"Not for much longer; the Russian Prime Minister and their President agreed to return them as part of the treaty, provided we hold up our end and lease them a warm water base in the Cortez; thus they have nothing left to fight about. They're already on the line with each other right now, using TJ Ashby as a go-between since they don't have official relations.

"The Russians already have a fleet in the pacific, and they can get to the Baja first with a fair-sized force, block the Chinese, and destroy the Mexican Pacific Fleet. The'll hit Mexico's ground forces on the southern peninsula and western mainland, and make them divide their strength so we can roll them up and crush them between us. Assuming the treaty is accepted – and I've spoken off the record to Hiro at the Charleston Naval Hospital, and he believes it will be – a much smaller but still effective Japanese force will be coming right behind them, on their way to the northern peninsula, where they will take the Mexicans in the rear and then link up with us and the Russians. We're also hauling some fast patrol boats overland, right behind the front, to drop into the northern part of Cortez after we reach Puerto Penasco, so we'll own it. Right now, they have a naval presence there; we don't. China won't take all three of us on. This formal alliance was the price for that."

"How can you be sure the Russians will turn the territory over to us?"

Frank laughed, utterly without humor.

"That's where the Japanese come in. I demanded that they be included as a hedge against the Russians. We

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can't stand against them either, but no one of us can stand against the other two. The three of us together, however, have a vested interest in securing our positions against China, as well as some trade issues and an *expansion* of our new alliance that will not only insure our own mutual prosperity, but will make it the single most powerful force in the world, more powerful than NATO ever was, more powerful than China is or is ever likely to be! We're about the make this alliance the single most powerful military and economic entity on the face of the earth, the most powerful in history!"

Sam's head was reeling, and for the life of him, he couldn't see how Frank could think any bigger than he already had.

"What the hell are you talking about?"

Frank managed a tight, very fleeting grin that gave an all too brief glimpse of the man Sam had come to know over the years.

"I might as well tell you; you're the only one I can tell right now, because you're the only one who needs to know. I'm going to need your negotiating skills to pull this off, Mr. Acting Vice President."

"Acting Vice…No! I won't do it!"

"Yeah, you will; you've already been drafted. I took a few minutes to get a conference call going between Jack, TJ and the newly-appointed Congressmen; I requested you be confirmed, and it was unanimous, *provided* you promise not to run for President in the next election, in order to make sure they all have a chance at it. I told them I didn't think that would be an issue." The grin flickered again. "Besides, unless you accept, you'll never know what I'm getting ready to do until after I've done it."

Sam glared at him.

"Do you know where I'd like to stick this cast on my leg?"

"Which one?"

"Both!"

"I've got a pretty good idea. So, do you agree not to run for President?"

"You know damned well I'm not going to run for President! I'm not even going to run for dog catcher! Now tell me what the hell you've got me into now!"

Frank told him, and, once Sam finally found the words, he grabbed his friend's hand and said, "Yes! Oh hell, yes!"

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DAY 1096

CHAPTER 61

We are the Southern Airborne,
First to make the hit.
We fall like lightning from the sky,
And land right in the shit!

~ unofficial anthem of the Confederate Airborne Marines

Flat on his belly at the crossing of a nameless dirt road over the Rio Altar, west of Nogales, Colonel Landers couldn't argue with the words to the Airborne's unofficial song tonight, because he and his battalion were in the shit, all right, right up to their necks and sinking fast.

It had been a textbook drop; they had landed without casualties or resistance, secured the area around the vital bridge and dug their fighting holes...and then all hell had broken loose.

There's at least a freaking brigade of Mexicans out there!

"Sir." Carefully turning his head without lifting it into the path of the tracer rounds and shrapnel screaming by just overhead, he looked toward the source of the voice and saw Corporal Hicks, his radio man. Hicks had one hand outstretched, offering him the microphone. Landers grabbed it.

"Red One."

"Red One, this is Red Six," which the Colonel mentally translated to Captain Lee of Alpha Company, "Sir, Alpha Wolf reports an enemy armor platoon headed this way from the South: two Lynx 90s and three APCs. They appear to have a company of infantry with them."

Landers felt like swearing and did so, loudly and heartfelt. That was all he needed.

"Tell Alpha Wolf to slow them down as much as they can, and get our anti-armor over there ASAP. Keep me posted."

"Yes sir."

Passing the mike back to Hicks, Landers squinted into the darkness towards the east. He could make out occasional flashes over the desert hills in that direction, but they didn't seem to be any closer than the last time he had looked.

A detached part of him wondered if they would get there in time; but he ignored it. He was Confederate Marine Airborne, after all, and the only important thing was doing his job, and today, that job was to hold this damned bridge.

"*General Gore!"*

Lucky Charlie's voice came out distorted and tinny through the multiple security patches it took to get him from northern Mexico into the Waddell-Franklin Building in South Carolina, but there was no mistaking its owner, or the anger that poured from it. Frank didn't like the sound of it at all.

"What have you got?"

"*I've got an officer who has allowed his unit to stall, and refuses to obey orders to move up to reinforce our advance elements, who are in a world of hurt right now."* After a second, he added, *"I'm fifty miles away, and the son of a bitch is too far off for me to shoot! I'm requesting authorization to target his*

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command vehicle with an air strike, sir, so I can replace him and get this unit moving again."

As Charlie explained the details, Frank's face grew darker and darker, and he finally said, "Hold one," before speaking to the room without looking, "Someone patch me through to Colonel Maddox – *Now!"*

It only took a moment.

"Why have you stopped, Colonel?"

"*Sir, we've encountered heavy resistance, both infantry and cavalry, at least 20% superior to our own forces."*

"That shouldn't be unexpected; you're in enemy territory."

"*We're waiting for reinforcements before proceeding."*

"Like hell you are!" Frank snarled, "*You* are the reinforcements; there's a battalion of paratroopers up in front of you holding onto their asses waiting on you! Now get going and punch through! We can't lose the inertia, or we are sunk!"

"*Sir, there is no way we can force through this – "*

"*Damn you!"* Frank's voice came out in a roar that visibly startled everyone else in the room. "Put your XO on – *now*!"

"*But sir – "*

"You 'but' me one more time, Colonel, and as God is my witness, I'll get on a plane, come down there, and I'll kill you myself! Now put him on!"

No one listening, including Colonel Maddox, had any doubt whatsoever that Frank meant exactly what he said., and an instant later a third voice came on the line.

"*Major Rake, sir."*

"Major, what would it take to force that line and get momentum going again? Don't you ask Maddox; you talk to me!"

"*We've got good men, sir,"* he said, *"but the casualties will be high – "*

"They'll be higher if you fail," Frank told him grimly, "because it'll give the Mexicans time to regroup. *Can* you do it?

There was the distinct sound of a deep breath, followed by, *"Yes sir, we can do it."*

"Do it then. Colonel Maddox is relieved of command for refusal to obey lawful orders and cowardice in the face of the enemy, and you're in charge; you're promoted to colonel, as of now. Place him under field arrest; if he resists, shoot him! You have two hours to break that line and reach those paratroopers; do you understand?"

"*Yes sir."*

"One more thing; I understand too. I understand exactly what I'm asking, but I also understand exactly what's at stake if we fail. If it wasn't worth it, I wouldn't give the order."

"*Hell, I know that, sir."* The voice changed to contain just a hint of excitement and anticipation. *"Don't worry about us; just cut us loose and let us go, and we'll tear 'em a new ass. We're the Confederate Marine Corps, by God, and this is what we do!"*

"God be with you."

"*You too, General. I'm going to go now; I've got to kick some Mexican ass."* A pause and then, *"Oh, by the way; we'll only need one hour!"*

As Frank pressed the disconnect button, his teeth bared in a savage snarling smile of satisfaction at Rake's can-do attitude, Lannigan nodded his approval at the action.

"Nothing else can be done, not if we intend to win."

He saw the smile vanish and a haunted expression pour in and fill up Frank's eyes as he sarcastically replied, "I'm sure that will be a great comfort to all the Southern widows and orphans I've just made tonight." He paused. "The fact that I'll be making a lot more Mexican ones doesn't help."

"It never helps, sir," Lannigan assured him, "I know; I've been there and done that. The only thing that helps is victory. It doesn't help very much, but at least it makes it all bearable."

Frank briefly clasped his shoulder in thanks, then returned to the computer screen, returned to the war.

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Texas Militia Colonel James Lamar Fannin had been to San Antonio many times, but he had never seen a man lying in the street with his balls cut off and stuffed in his mouth before.

Not even a man, but a boy. He can't be more than sixteen!

A middle-aged White woman, as naked as the mutilated, bloating corpse, knelt in the sticky pool of dried blood surrounding it, keening like a screech owl, her body rocking back and forth like a metronome. She had been raped God only knew how many times; he could smell the stench of semen over the diesel fumes of his APC and the stink of the open, gaping wound in the dead boy's lower abdomen where his manhood used to be. The woman never noticed him, never looked up, but kept rocking, forward and back again, over and over, her wavering banshee wail never stopping.

It would have been bad enough if she had been the only one, but she wasn't, not by a long shot. He had already passed a dozen similar scenes, and he could hear many more; women weeping and wailing came from all directions, here and there all over the city, their voices rising and mingling until it seemed as if the earth itself was crying out in pain. Here and there their cries were punctuated by single gunshots, as the individual militiamen shot the coyotes and stray dogs feeding on the corpses.

Worst of all, it's my fault!

Logically, he knew that was a stupid sentiment, but it was one he just couldn't shake. No, he had no idea this was going to happen, and yes, it would have happened with or without him, but there was no question he shared in the blame.

Tarbox had just made so much sense! After all, he appeared to be a champion of states' rights against a tyrannical central government that, according to him, was no different than the one they had broken free from not even a year ago. Everything he said had just seemed so true, and his own mentor, General Gaul, swore that it was.

The twenty-eight year old officer, tall and lean and so blond you had to look close to see his eyelashes, had never done anything more than vocally support that faction he had come to believe in, but that was enough. That was too much.

After the Mexican invasion and General Gore assuming command, he hadn't really been surprised when Governor King arrived with a mixed group of Texas Militia Special Forces and Military Police, backed up by a Confederate Marine tank company. The Governor had unceremoniously yanked three enlisted men and eight officers – including his superior, General Gaul, in whose place he now commanded – out of the ranks. They read the charges of treason, put them against the wall of the nearest building, and the Lone Star SF boys machine-gunned them all without further ado, leaving the mangled bodies where they fell. The Governor himself walked down the line and personally fired a single shot into the head of each one, just to be sure. It wasn't surprising that they killed them; what was surprising was that his own body wasn't lying there gathering blowflies too.

Governor King had looked him squarely in the eyes and said, "Remember this, boy; if I didn't need someone to lead this bunch right now, I would have shot your sorry ass too! You're in command; don't you screw it up!" Then he and his men had remounted their vehicles and departed, leaving their object lesson lying behind them.

Fannin got the message loud and clear, but that lesson was nothing compared to the schooling he was getting in what used to be San Antonio. The keening of the women continued, as lonely and unstoppable as the Texas wind blowing through the ruins of the Alamo, blown up by the Mexicans as soon as they arrived.

"Which unit came through and did this?" he asked his XO, Major Meadows. Meadows told him, and he nodded.

"Private Duvall; you're from this area. Which way would you go if you were trying to get back to border as quickly as possible?"

"Route 16 South, sir.

"I want them," was all he said, but it was enough; it was understood.

Colonel Fannin left what medics he could spare, along with some of the older, less-fit militiamen, to help out however they could. Gathering the rest of his unit, he headed south at full speed, following his target with

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death in his eyes.

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DAY 1097

CHAPTER 62

"*Damn it, I'm no diplomat!"*

"I know," Frank dryly told Jack Boggess on the phone, "but you're the best we've got, and the closest, so you're going." He didn't mention that his first choice would have been Sam, but the older man was in no shape to make the trip.

"*TJ is – "*

"TJ is running some other important diplomacy for me right now."

"*More important than an invitation to an emergency meeting of the UN when they're threatening to send in peace keepers to stop us?"*

"Yes."

A shocked pause, then, *"What – "*

"You know I can't tell you that. No more arguments; I need you to do this. We've got to stop this thing now, or at least make them stop and think about it some more! Now get your best suit and get your butt to the Charleston Airport; you'll be picked up in two hours. The Russian Ambassador to the UN will be sending a jet for you; the situation on the northern border is too tense right now for me to want to send anything of ours across."

"*What the hell am I supposed to say?"*

"You'll think of something. Write your speech on the way, and email me a copy as soon as you get a rough draft." A pause, then, "You might as well take Philindy and Tiffany with you too; it's probably the only time they'll get to see New York, even if it is only from the back of a diplomatic limousine."

"…and thus, we, the United Nations, do hereby demand that the Confederate States of America immediately declare a cease-fire and begin a withdrawal from the sovereign territory of the Nation of Mexico, and accept a peace-keeping force to insure there are no more hostilities."

There was a scattering of applause, a handful of boos, but mostly there was silence, as every eye turned to the CSA's representative, Congressman Jack Boggess, to see how he would respond to the resolution.

Jack knew the resolution was not binding, being no more than a petition signed by the majority of the membership, including most of the EU, the US, China, nearly all of Latin America and Africa, and half the Islamic states, and that it would never pass the Security Council, as the Russians would never tolerate it. Still, some might decide to send in peace-keepers unilaterally. Besides, it just galled the hell out of him, and he was literally seething as he pushed his wheelchair out in the aisle and approached the specially-lowered podium when called, a sheaf of written notes in his lap, containing the officially-approved Confederate response, his chair's squeaking wheels echoing hollowly on the tiles.

Jack took his place and glared out at the room, his hard eyes running over the UN ambassadors as his anger continued to build until he could stand it no longer. Glancing at his notes, the letters appeared to all be running together beneath a haze of red mist that only he could see. He could feel and actually hear his own blood pounding in his temples, and he came to an abrupt decision. Calmly, he wadded up the notes for his prepared speech into a ball, and tossed it aside, letting it fall to the floor, much to the surprise of the diplomats. Then he leaned forward, gripping the edges of the podium with both hands.

I'll give them an answer, all right!

"You demand," he began, and then repeated it, drawing out the last word. "You dee-maaaand.

"Mexico launched an illegal, unprovoked attack across our borders, and you demand. They attempted to carve out a whole section of our country, and you demand." His volume rose with every sentence, his native mountain twang plainer and plainer in his voice with every word. "They slaughtered tens of thousands of civilian men and helpless prisoners of war, and you demand! They raped thousands of women and little kids,

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and you demand!"

Jack paused, and took a deep breath and pointed his finger like a gun, bouncing it up and down as he spoke to emphasize his words.

"Well, you dirty, sanctimonious, self-righteous, hypocritical sons of *bitches*, I'll tell you what! Why don't you demand in one hand and shit in the other one, and let me know which one gets full first? And if any of you think about sending your so-called 'peace-keepers,' you'd best tell them to pack a good lunch, because they're fixing to have a long damned day! In the meantime, to hell with you all; I've got a war to fight!"

With that, he cranked his hands in opposite directions, spinning his chair and rolling it down the ramp and out of the room, leaving pure pandemonium behind him as most of the ambassadors shouted with outrage...most, but not all. The Russian and Serbian Delegations were on their feet clapping and cheering at the top of their lungs while the Japanese Delegate nonchalantly raised a hand to hide the smile he couldn't quite suppress.

At the makeshift Confederate Headquarters in Columbia, there was a dead silence as all eyes turned away from the live broadcast and toward Frank, trying to gauge his reaction. He simply stared at the image of mass confusion on the screen for a moment, and then the corners of his mouth began turning up in a grin as he shrugged.

"Well, he did tell me he was no diplomat. What the hell? I liked that better than the speech he had prepared anyway."

Samantha laughed at that; for the first time since Linda's death, she laughed. It was contagious; Frank laughed with her, and several other people in the room did too. The humor didn't last long, only about thirty seconds, but it was a step forward.

Dixie Christian Radio

"*Reverend Jase, many Christians in the Confederacy, while solidly supporting the war effort, were frankly shocked at the language used on the floor of the United Nations by Congressman Jack Boggess, and felt it reflected badly on both him and the Confederacy. Would you like to give your opinion on that?"*

"*Yes, I would; I would like to tell those sanctimonious, self-righteous hypocrites to get down off their little painted high horses and get down on their knees and pray that God might find it in His heart to forgive them! Maybe I wouldn't have put it exactly the way Jack did, but maybe some of you out there warming the pews with your fat, lazy backsides instead of helping win this war, feed and clothe the refugees, and keep the Confederacy running ought to first consider what it is a man is cussing about before you condemn him for doing it. Did he take God's name in vain? No! Did he commit a sin? No! All he did was hurt your poor, tender, little sensibilities.*

"*I'll tell you what; if you think he was wrong, you come on down here, and you work beside me digging the bits and pieces of men, women and little tiny babies out of the rubble of Columbia, and I figure you'll cuss too. I know I've done enough of it lately myself!*

"*Now, unless you're ready to jump in here and help, get the hell out of the way; there's a chance some more people may still be alive under this mess, and we need to be getting them out!"*

Southern News Service

Russian troops have landed at San Lucas on the southern Baja and at San Blas on the Mexican mainland, and their ships have blockaded the mouth of the Sea of Cortez. They are pressing north on both sides, backed up by the shelling from the ships' guns, in an effort to link up with our land forces. They've reportedly taken the airfield at San Jose del Cabo, converting it to a base for the fighters and bombers currently arriving from across the Pacific.

Our military advisors have told us that, while the end may be in sight, the whole thing hinges on our

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ability to break through the bottleneck at the head of the Cortez, west of San Luis.

Czech News Service

Despite orders to the contrary by the United States Government, thousands of people have gathered along California's border with Mexico in hopes of catching a glimpse of the major tank battle that appears set to begin only a few miles away. Seemingly indifferent to the danger of sitting on the very edge of a battlefield involving air strikes and artillery fire, a carnival atmosphere prevails, as many people have even brought their children with them to witness the bloody show. Entrepreneurs have actually set up food stands, and are doing a busy trade selling burritos, hot dogs, beer, and soft drinks from the backs of their trucks. Still others have set up impromptu gambling parlors, taking bets on the outcome.

All is not quiet, however; there have been several fights between Caucasians and Latinos, as which side they cheer for seems to be divided largely along racial lines...

Lucky Charlie stood half out of the hatch of his idling Abrams A2 tank and scanned the horizon ahead. The enemy was there, just a few miles ahead, and they were ready; that much was certain.

The smoke still belching from the burning Bradley that had been part of his advance scout unit said that loud and clear.

The Mexicans and their US armor reinforcements had set up about where he thought they would, between San Luis and Mexicali to the west. Despite the Confederates' best efforts, the enemy had taken down most of the bridges over the Rio Colorado, although the Confederates had managed to gain control of the ones closest to Highway 2 that ran just south of the border, and to push the Mexican forces back seventeen miles. Backed up by the “stolen” armor, they had dug in there in a line several miles long, and stripped practically every soldier out of the northern Baja to reinforce them.

The Mexicans had no air support – thanks to the vast superiority of Confederate Naval Air power – but what the Confederates had available was minimal; the most of the western air wing was tied up helping out the militia reserves to the north, all that stood between the increasingly desperate attempts of the Mexican invasion force in Arizona to break out, and the Confederate flank they'd be breaking out into. He had heard the reserves were catching hell up there, but the old men and young kids were determinedly holding their ground, kicking ass and taking names.

How long they can manage that, however, is the question.

While he watched, the entirety of their currently-available air support – three A10 Thunderbolts, better knows as “Warthogs” – circled widely like birds of prey, swinging wide before swooping back at levels that seemed insanely close to the unforgiving desert ground, buzzing the enemy below. Their 30 mm automatic cannons sounded like tearing cloth in the distance as the fist-sized depleted uranium slugs knocked holes in whatever they hit. Columns of smoke from incinerated diesel fuel rose from burning vehicles even before the planes pulled off a little distance from the increasingly heavy return fire to loose their AGM-65 missiles.

Charlie grinned around the twisted black cigar that was clenched in the good corner of his mouth.

Those Naval Air bastards live for this shit!

Live for it or not, however, the best the hotshot pilots could do was to soften up the objective; it would be up to the cavalry and mobile infantry to take it, and it wouldn't be easy. The enemy had had hours to prepare, and they had made the most of it. Using bulldozers, they had dug a series of shallow trenches over a space of miles, allowing over half their available Abrams to cover in a classic hull-down defilade, protecting their hulls and vulnerable tracks and leaving only their turrets with their 120 mm guns visible and target-able by direct fire. The Confederate armor was going headfirst right into that without any cover other than what Mother Nature decided to mercifully throw their way, and Charlie had no doubt it was going to be a first class bloody bitch...particularly since there would be no flanking to the right, as that end of the line was within a mile of the US border, and the Confederates were forbidden to cross it. That left a straight-in charge with a southern flanking pincer movement the only possibility, and he knew the Mexicans was just as aware of it as

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he was, and had prepared for it.

And we're going to kick their ass anyway!

Flicking the cigar away, he raised the microphone to his lips.

"This is it," Lucky Charlie told them over the command channel, his voice carrying into each and ever tank and fighting vehicle, "The enemy is ahead of us, dug in and waiting, and I'm not going to disappoint them, not after the bastards were good enough to dig their own graves for us.

"This is the day, boys; this is the day we show the whole world what it means to be a Southerner! This is for Columbia, for Texas and Arizona and New Mexico! This is for every raped woman and dead baby of our own blood kin! This is the day of the black flag! You will not retreat, you will not surrender, you will not stop, you will not even slow down under any circumstances until you kill them all and come out the other side! Stick to the plan, do your job and we're going into them, we're going over them, and we're going to plow them right into the ground!" He finished with a high-pitched, yelping Rebel yell, and even over the clanking, squeaking, and groaning of the vehicles, he could faintly hear his men returning it.

"*Pirate Leader,"* came the pilot's voice over the radio, *"We're out of ammo; it's up to you now."*

"Acknowledged; good job, boys. Transfer a sit-rep to my IO, and then clear the immediate area. Stay on the outside as long as you've got fuel, and be my eyes in the sky.

"*Acknowledged, Pirate Leader. Good hunting."*

No sooner than the pilot signed off a new voice came on.

"*Pirate Leader, Artillery in position."*

"You're cleared to fire; give them hell!"

No sooner had he heard the acknowledgement than the M109 Paladin howitzers began pounding behind him, their 155 mm shells screaming as they arced toward their targets, allowing the tanks to proceed under their cover.

His grin grew on the side of his face still capable of it, morphing into an expression of almost gleeful enthusiasm. At that moment, he forgot the scars, forgot the steel and plastic that made up half his limbs, forgot everything, focusing only on the task at hand. He was a cavalry officer in the mold of Nathan Bedford Forrest and JEB Stuart: a born soldier, and he never felt more alive than when doing his job.

Those flyboys aren't the only ones who live for this shit!

Ignoring an enemy howitzer shell that burst only a few hundred yards away, close enough that he felt the air pressure, Charlie gave his orders into the microphone. "Assume attack formation! All units, fire smoke, maximum range; give me a screen!" There was a roar of continuous firing as the tank commanders obeyed, and the dense, roiling smoke began obscuring the battlefield on impact. "Mine plows up and forward!"

Specially-outfitted Abrams rumbled ahead from the pack, equipped with heavily-built, angled and toothed plows. Like working a giant, deadly garden, the teeth sank into the hard, dry soil and the diesel engines revved as the tanks surged forward, digging up and shoving aside dirt, rock, and underbrush...for now. Charlie knew good and well that the enemy had been there too long not to have left a few less-pleasant obstacles in their way, as the burned-out Bradley ahead had discovered.

"Main column forward! Stay right in their tracks! Reserves, stand ready!"

If Charlie had had his way, he would not only have gone with the initial attack, but would have been the first in line. As the task force leader, however, he didn't have that option, so he sat chafing with the reserves and waited and watched as the first wave of tanks rolled forward, followed by the Bradleys and Strykers...for now.

The first several hundred yards went without incident, beyond the enemy artillery crashing down here and there; the Confederate sapper teams been out as far as they could before coming under preventively-heavy Mexican fire, and had marked several clear routes. They were soon past that point, however. Before long, he heard an anti-tank mine detonating in the distance, which, he knew from experience, would likely do little damage to the tank pushing the mine plow, beyond making the crew shit themselves.

"Keep your spacing," he ordered over the command frequency, "Don't bunch up!"

A few minutes later, he got the call he had been waiting for.

"Pirate Leader, this is Pirate One. We are within range and receiving fire."

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“Pirate One, Main Force is cleared to fire at will whenever you have a clear target. Don't waste 'em boys; make 'em count and we'll all be drinking tequila in Tijuana tomorrow! And I'm buying!”

The sporadic fire ahead gradually increased to a dull roar, and Charlie ordered the artillery to concentrate their fire toward the rear of the enemy line.

The first casualty was a mine plow; the mines increased nearer to the enemy, and one of them blew the left side of the plow off. The tank crushed the twisted metal into the sand, then passed over a second mine two hundred yards farther on. The detonation wiped out the left track, leaving the tank immobile. As the following vehicles swept around it, the crew refused to abandon it, but turned it into a stationary firing platform, giving the enemy hell for almost three minutes before one of the opposing Abrams opened up on the sitting duck. The heavy frontal armor managed to stop the first two rounds, but not the third, and the dead crew burned inside as the remainder of their own ammunition cooked off.

More and more vehicles ground to a halt; the mine plows suffered the worst, because they were in front. Fully half in the front line of the main thrust were down with direct hits or mines by the time those in the southerly pincer movement engaged. As they went down, more and more tanks and fighting vehicles were forced to brave the mines themselves, with predictable results, but still the force stubbornly kept driving toward the enemy, who was taking a pounding of his own.

“Reserves, forward! Everyone, top speed, but stay in any tracks you see for as long as you can.”

An Abrams tank will top forty miles per hour on a highway, but only a desperate or crazy man wants to endure the bone-jarring ride on open ground that makes you feels like your entire body is being beaten with a baseball bat. Bracing himself in the hatch, Charlie let out another loud Rebel yell that was a whoop of pure glee. The radio picked it up on the command channel, and it was suddenly being echoed back from everyone with a radio on, despite their almost unbelievable discomfort level.

“Sir,” his driver said in his ear piece, “We're taking fire; do you think maybe you should come inside and button up?”

Charlie grinned, making the damaged side of his mouth twist. Like many tank commanders, he preferred to trade the risk of exposing his head for a direct view of what was going on.

“Why? Do you think they're going to ruin my pretty face?”

He inhaled deeply, taking in the smoke and exhaust, the grease and dust, even while his ears filled with the clanking and rattling that could be heard even over continuous roar of the guns' rolling thunder.

His driver whipped around an overturned Stryker, lying on its side, and avoiding the crew and the infantry squad it carried who were now scrambling out the open back. Charlie was pleased to note that it was one of the MSSF “David Teams” – giant killers – hung with explosives and packing a recoilless rifle and one of the enormous Denel-Mechem NTW20 sniper rifles, a 20mm weapon that would punch holes in fighting vehicles like a bullet through a tin can. He was even more pleased to see them quickly regroup and go running toward the front. No doubt there would be work for them to do, assuming they lived to do it.

“*Pirate Leader, priority one call!”*

Charlie glared at the words. *Don't they know I'm a little busy here?*

“Patch it.”

“*Pirate Leader, this is Irregular One.”*

The General's single eye widened in surprise at hearing Frank Gore's call sign.

“Go ahead, One.”

“*Cut your artillery to the south. I repeat, cut your artillery to the south! There are friendlies inside the enemy's rear, southern quadrant.”*

Charlie passed the order before asking, “Who?*”* while thinking, *Who's so important you would call me yourself?*

Frank told him, and then said, *“Pass it along and continue as you were. And one more thing; button your damned hatch before you get your head shot off! One out.”*

Even as he passed the information on about the unexpected friendlies ahead, he self-consciously looked around. The logical part of his mind knew Frank wasn't really watching him, but rather knew him all too well. He was just getting ready to obey that order when his tank hit the mine in the worst possible way.

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“Pirate Leader, this is Pirate One; do you copy? Pirate Leader, this is Pirate One; do you copy?”

Already within the Mexican lines and mixing it up with fire and steel, the newly-promoted Colonel Rake only paused a moment to yell, “Shit!” and slam his fist against the unyielding steel of his tank in frustration before keying his mike again. He knew damned well what that most likely meant, and, if he gave them time to think about it, so would the rest of the task force.

“All units, this is Pirate One. Pirate Leader is temporarily out of communication. I repeat; Pirate Leader is out of communication. Proceed with the plan! Do not stop, do not slow down! Hit them hard!” He paused, taking just an instant to swallow hard just once, all the grief he had time to allow himself for now. Opening communications once more, he bellowed to keep his voice from breaking, “This is for Lucky Charlie! Kill those sons of bitches! Kill them, damn it! Kill them!”

“*Pirate One, this is Pirate Two!”*

Unseen, Rake nodded at the call sign; it was Major Losey, commanding the southern pincer arm.

“Go ahead, Two.”

“*The enemy on the southern flank is in retreat. They're falling back toward the main body!”*

Although he couldn't hear it, he was sure he could feel the triumphant yells from the Confederate Marines on receiving that particular transmission, mostly because he felt like letting out one himself, if he'd had the time to spare.

“Keep on them, Two; don't let up! Keep pushing!”

“*Yes sir!”*

“All units, this is Pirate One; keep up the pressure. Bring all infantry reserves forward to reinforce the main thrust; I need everything to the front *now*! The enemy may make a drive to escape across the border to the north. Take out everyone you can, but keep an eye on your GPS. No units or personnel, I repeat, no units or personnel will approach closer than one mile of the border.

“Hammer One; did you copy that?”

“*This is Hammer One; affirmative.”*

Rake could hear the eagerness in the Artillery Major's voice; once the Marines had gotten amongst the enemy, he had had to settle for occasionally 'sniping' at any Mexican vehicles straying outside the main area of combat. He was an experienced man, and knew what was coming before the order was given.

“All right, Hammer One, you've got your killing field, and anything coming into it is fair game. Lets see how well you can shoot.”

“Oh shit!”

“What is it?” One of the civilians on the ground less than a hundred feet inside California shouted up at the man sharing his perch with a pair of surfboards on the roof of an old Chevy van.

Never pulling his eye away from the powerful tripod-mounted telescope, the first speaker said, “The Mexican tanks are retreating! They're coming this way! They're only about a mile off!”

The news rippled through the crowd, and someone loudly exclaimed, “Cool!” before someone else realized that the Confederate artillery fire was coming that way too, when a stray chunk of shrapnel dropped from the sky and shattered the van's windshield.

Finally looking away from the scope, he shook his sun-bleached hair out of his eyes as he leaned forward, taking in the broken glass and the piece of hot steel starting to smoke in upholstery of his front passenger seat.

“This is not cool, man! This is not cool at all!”

“This one's screwed.”

“Take his vitals.”

“You don't need his vitals; just look at him! Both legs gone, arm blown off, half his face missing...like I said, he's screwed. If he's not dead already, he will be in a few minutes; he's not even bleeding anymore. Let's stick with the ones we can help.” The medic shook his head. “Poor son of a bitch!”

The figure on the ground coughed, spat out a mixed clot of blood and dust, and said, “You ever call me a

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son of a bitch again, boy, and I'll kick your ass so far up between your shoulder blades, you'll have to take your shirt off to shit!"

"Oh my God! It's Lucky Charlie – I mean, General Carnes!"

"Hell yes, it's General Carnes! Now get your worthless ass over there and find my damned legs! You!" He pointed to the second of the pair. "What's happening with the battle?"

"We won, sir! I hear our frontal attack would have eventually beaten them anyway, but when our friends hit them from behind, they freaked. The Mexicans surrendered, and those bastards from the US made a run for the border."

"Damn! How many of them made it back across to California?"

The medic grinned.

"I heard none of them did, sir. There wasn't many of them left to start with. Colonel Rake gave the order to resume artillery, and I guess they really put the hurt on them. Sir, I heard their last Abrams was hit just a few feet from the border, and was still on fire when it rolled across."

Charlie nodded his satisfaction.

"Get on the horn and congratulate the Colonel for me, and tell him I'll be joining him within the hour."

"Yes sir, but you need to be checked out first."

"Are you disobeying a direct order, boy?"

"No sir," the medic said stubbornly, "but you could have a concussion, internal injuries, anything, and I'm doing my primary duty by delaying that order until I'm sure my commanding officer isn't going to die while I'm fiddle-farting around on the radio – sir!"

Charlie laughed, and was surprised at just how much it hurt, and, at the same time, just how good it felt.

Twenty-five minutes later, he sat leaning against the shady side of the Medics' Humvee, with a raging headache and ringing ears, listening to the excited chatter of the victorious Confederates over the radio while being debriefed on what had happened by a Lieutenant.

"You were the only survivor from your tank, sir; the only thing that saved you was being in that open hatch. As nearly as we can figure at this point, it blew you out of there like a rocket out of a tube, and you smacked down over here, a good thirty-feet away. If you hadn't already been unconscious and limp, the impact itself would have probably killed you. As it is, you've got some abrasions, bruises, and a concussion at least, but I'd still feel better if you'd let the medics get you to the rear to be checked out, sir."

"I don't have time, and I've already been checked out. Did someone find my legs and my arm?"

As if in answer, a soldier came up with a load of dusty metal in his arms.

"Sir, your arm must have come off inside the tank, because it's still smoldering and we can't find it anywhere else. We've got your legs, but..." His voice trailed off as he held out the offerings apologetically.

The plastic cuff of one of them was split all the way down the side, and someone had obviously run over the other, because it was bent at a thirty-degree angle, halfway between the ankle and knee. Charlie sighed.

"Get a couple of guys and try to straighten this one out for me, and give me some duct tape to hold this one on. Then let's get up to the front so I can meet our friends."

Charlie was true to his word; despite a slightly limping gait, a bandage in place of his eye patch, and a disheveled appearance, he saluted and then shook hands with the short, powerfully-built Major Sakura of the *Tokushu Sakusen Gun,* the Japanese Special Forces Group.

Southern Military Monthly

The Japanese Special Forces company did a HALO jump several miles to the southwest of the Mexican position. While the enemy was concentrating on General Carnes' frontal assault, they infiltrated their rear in that direction. Launching their attack actually from within the Mexican ranks with their Type 01 anti-tank weapons, Howa 84 recoilless rifles, Barrett sniper rifles, and other assorted arms, they threw the enemy into panicked confusion, allowing General Carnes' southern pincer arm to fold the Mexican flank

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up, forcing its retreat back into the main force. This action, combined with the ferocity and accompanying casualties of the primary Confederate assault, forced General Morales to surrender.

Czech News Service

Eighteen people were left dead and almost two hundred injured after they disobeyed law enforcement and went to the Southern California border to watch the battle going on in Mexican territory. There were a few minor injuries from shrapnel, but most of the casualties occurred during the stampede out of harm's way, when several people panicked and drove their vehicles right through the frightened crowds blocking their way.

The number of dead and injured do not include crew of the burning tank that came to a halt just inside the US border. No one else from the other side appeared to have made it across.

The victorious Confederate forces have established a small base camp half a mile inside Mexico, within sight of the burned-out tank still sitting on California soil. US forces have moved forces of their own into the area and strung concertina razor wire for several miles along the border, but there have been no incidents reported.

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DAY 1101

CHAPTER 63

The Confederate News Service

On the Western Front, following brutal combat, General "Lucky Charlie" Carnes has successfully linked up with our Japanese and Russian allies on the Baja Peninsula, and is forging southward along the Cortez, solidifying our hold on both sides. Other than a few scattered Mexican units that have yet to surrender and some guerrilla bands, the Confederacy now holds the entire Baja, the Sea of Cortez, and the west coast of Mexico north of San Blas in the Mexican State of Nayarit.

They are meeting little formal resistance, in part because, knowing it has lost the Cortez, the Mexican Government has pulled many of its troops back, concentrating them in the southwestern coast and interior. Our analysts believe this is an attempt not only to protect Mexico City itself from our forces, but to guard against the Chinese occupation of Chiapas extending into even more of their territory.

In the Confederacy itself, the fighting in the southwestern states is all but over. Even while the last of the surrounded Mexican forces are being mopped up in the Confederate and Indian territories of the Southwest, still more of our militia is pushing southward in the east, deeper into Mexico, especially along the Gulf Coast, where they hope to link up with the elite militia units from Florida, Georgia, North Carolina, and South Carolina, who are currently hitting the beaches of the Yucatan Peninsula and points north...

Maria Valdez was in deep trouble, and she knew it. Crouched in the ruins of what was once a luxury hotel until it made the intimate acquaintance of a sixteen-inch shell from one of the Confederate ships' big guns, she pulled her four year-old daughter and six year-old son closer to her side, hugging them so tightly they could barely breathe.

"Mama…" Juan began to protest, but she hissed, "Shh!" and crouched down lower like an animal hiding in the rubble, the crumbs of concrete crunching beneath her ruined shoes. She tried her best to ignore the bits still falling down from the angled slab only inches above her head, and the tangled, rusty rebar jutting out of it, bent and twisted like the fossilized tentacles of some long-dead, impossibly large beast.

The voices she heard outside were speaking English, not Spanish. As wife of Mexico's former Vice President – just-inaugurated President, she had no idea what the vengeful Southern troops might do to her or her children…no, she had several ideas, and none of them were good. If not for her children, and the off chance of saving them, she would have taken the little engraved, gold-plated Walther .32 automatic in her right hand, put it to her temple, and pulled the trigger.

She had been vacationing here when the war began. She had watched the broadcast of President Morales' speaking about their great victory, and then seen it abruptly cut off. Later came the news of his death, along with many untold thousands, maybe tens of thousands of others, as the hot iron fist of Confederate retaliation slammed down to obliterate the very spot where he stood. Her husband had taken command then, and suddenly – nothing. No news, no radio, no television, and no electricity to run them. Virtually their entire electrical grid had collapsed following the carefully-targeted Confederate bombings, and it was as if all technology had come to a halt. She had decided that, all things considered, she would be better off staying where she was, in the deepest South, in a city guarded by a battalion of troops, as far away from the fighting as possible, especially since she could find out little of substance about what was actually going on. With little communication, rumor took its place, running on quick, panicked feet, and getting bigger and wilder as it went

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until you couldn't believe anything.

That was why she and her military escort didn't know about the Confederate Carrier Group that had abruptly appeared off their coast, and Hell itself came raining down. Their first inkling the enemy might be close was when the giant shells began making craters in the earth, and turned the rows of high-rise beachfront hotels into a chaotic piles, as if some giant insane child with anger issues had decided to play with blocks.

The shells were coming down too fast and too thick to safely move her, so the Mexican Army platoon detailed to protect her had placed her in the dubious shelter of the already-crushed building under the theory that, while nowhere was safe, it was less likely that a shell would fall in the exact same spot twice. The bombardment ceased, then more ordinance fell from the fighters and bombers streaking through the skies above, followed by small arms fire as the vengeful Confederates hit the beach and began driving their spearhead through the fragmented troops in the city like a knife slicing through butter.

The closer the firing came, the more fearful she was.

Crouched behind the still-smoldering wreckage of a burned-out Volkswagen that stank of the charred meat inside it, Corporal Rick Carmichael of the 1st South Carolina Irregulars wiped his eyes with the back of his left hand, coming away with a muddy paste of sweat and soot, dust and blood. The soot and dust came from the city, and the sweat and blood was what it had required to take it...and, as evidenced by the sounds of scattered gunfire, it wasn't quite taken yet.

Glancing over his shoulder as he moved his hand back to its place on the forearm of his assault rifle, he motioned with a jerk of his head for Private Griffin to advance. Griffin instantly obeyed, crouching low as he darted past him to drop inside the shelter of a traumatically-drained hot tub and the surrounding pile of splintered lumber that was once its deck. An instant later his head and rifle bobbed up as one, and he gave Rick a curt nod.

One by one, the remaining eight men of his ten-man squad – his squad, by God! – ran forward in the same manner, scattering themselves amongst the plentiful cover. It still amazed him that they instantly obeyed him, considering he was nearly the youngest one of all of them, even if he did have the corporal's stripes on his shoulders. Ignoring the Mexican soldier with the bound hands for the moment, he looked at each man, and waited until each one gave the all clear signal. They saw nothing…which, of course, didn't mean there was nothing there.

Still, he reflected, dabbing once more at the shallow shrapnel cut on his forehead that wouldn't seem to stop bleeding, there comes a time when you have to either shit or get off the pot.

Fixing his eyes on the Mexican, he asked him in broken Spanish if he was sure this was the spot.

"*Si! Si! Por favor…"*

"Por favor your little brown ass! We made a deal, and they'd better be there!"

"*Si! Si!"* his prisoner affirmed, emphasizing his sincerity by violently nodding his head until it threatened to fall off.

He's been more than cooperative; I'll have to give him that!

Rick's squad – then under the command of Sergeant Dewey – had run headlong into an ambush by the similar-sized Mexican force of which the prisoner was a member. Dewey had taken a fatal 7.65 round through the neck, and Rick had responded by screaming, "Charge!" and then doing exactly that, and the rest had followed him, blazing away as they came. That wasn't what the Mexicans had expected, as evidenced by the fact that there was only one survivor from their side. The POW with him now had thrown his HK G3 away and was waving his hands, screaming, *"Por favor! Madre de Dios, por favor!"*

Private Rayray Hayden, the squad's shotgunner, was high on adrenaline and anger and was going to shoot him anyway, but when he raised his Ithaca Model 37 riot gun to do just that, and the man began screaming something else, Rick ordered him to lower his weapon. The soldier had just made them an offer they couldn't refuse.

Seeing the men providing cover, he called out, "Rayray; left of the hole!"

Rayray immediately obeyed, taking cover in the wreckage about fifteen feet from the designated spot. Once he was in place, Rick grabbed the Mexican prisoner by his collar and hurried him along with him, taking

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cover behind a large section of concrete only a couple of yards away from the other side of the hole, opposite Private Hayden.

After proning his POW out on the ground, he knelt next to him, cupped his free hand to his mouth and called out in Spanish, "Senora Valdez; come out now!"

He heard a child's voice starting to say something, only to be abruptly cut off when someone clamped a hand over its mouth.

"Senora Valdez," he repeated, "we know you and your children are in there. Come out now and you have my word you will not be harmed."

As he spoke, he saw Rayray quietly moving closer to the hole until he was right beside it. The teenage militiaman darted his head around the edge for a quick look, then jerked it out simultaneously with the hollow-sounding, small caliber gunshot from within. The bullet ricocheted off the ruined concrete and sent the chips flying, one of which painfully split the skin over Rayray's right cheekbone. Instinctively he shifted his grip on the Ithaca, preparing to return fire, and then jumped when a second round struck the ground at his feet. Looking at the latest bullet's source, he saw his Corporal aiming his rifle at his head.

"We need them alive," Rick mouthed silently, and, more at the sight of the business end of the weapon than at the order, Rayray subsided. Once he was sure his subordinate had sufficiently calmed, Rick lowered his rifle.

"That was not a smart thing to do, Senora! I'm giving you one last chance. If you don't throw out your gun and come out by the count of three, I am going to drop a grenade in hole with you and blast you out, you and your children both. One…two…three!"

Rick pulled the grenade from his belt, drew the pin, and tossed it underhanded through the hole beneath the tilted slab where it clattered off the wreckage within. Instantly he heard screaming and scrambling, followed by billows of red smoke that quickly filled the confined space and began spilling out the front, along with a terrified Maria Valdez and her offspring.

I didn't tell her it was a smoke grenade!

Rick was closest, so he chopped her hard across the wrist with the barrel of his FAL, cracking the bone and sending the .32 clattering on the sidewalk, and Rayray hit her with a body block, tackling her and pinning her facedown on the broken concrete. After securing her hands behind her with one of the flex-ties they all carried, Rick scooped up her pistol, put the safety on, and dropped it into a cargo pocket on his fatigue pants. He then pulled her to her feet and led her stumbling back into cover, leaving the cursing Rayray to corral her frightened children.

As soon as the Mexican POW saw her, he started shouting, "That's her!" and she swore violently at him and kicked impotently in his direction. Rick didn't have time for the drama, and shook her hard to get her attention.

"You are Senora Valdez, wife of President Valdez; is that right?" She looked away, and he responded by jerking her so close their faces were almost touching, and he grabbed her by the chin and cheeks with his calloused, filthy hand, and forced her to look into his wild blue eyes blazing out from a face hard beyond its years, smeared with filth and blood. "You better understand this, Senora! I lost my whole family thanks to your damned people, so I suggest you think about just how I feel about every one of you sons of bitches right now before you decide what you're going to do! Now I'm going to ask you *once* more; are you the President's wife or not?"

"Y-yes, I'm Senora Maria Valdez."

After ordering her to sit on the broken sidewalk, he lifted his radio.

"Red Fox 4 to Alpha Wolf; priority one!"

"*Alpha Wolf is busy; please state your message and it will be passed to him at the earliest convenience."*

Rick swore; this damned REMF radioman divorced from the action onboard the ship was all he needed.

"Sensitive information, Irregulars Priority One! I need Alpha Wolf now!"

Irregulars priority meant that any Irregular, most particularly an officer, even Frank Gore himself, would drop whatever he was doing and answer. Unfortunately, the radio operator wasn't one of the Irregulars, and

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disliked them, in large part because he thought their reputations were overblown and they were a bunch of prima donnas. He wasn't going to miss a chance to screw with one of them when he had it.

"*Alpha Wolf is busy; please state your message.*"

Suddenly the sound of a hard blow echoed over the radio, followed by a body and an overturned chair hitting the floor, a string of curses, and several more thuds that sounded suspiciously like a combat boot meeting flesh. Then, over the moaning in the background, Rick was thankful to hear the familiar voice of his commander and mentor, Colonel Casey Graham, come on line.

"*This is Alpha Wolf; I just fired my radio operator. What've you got, 4?*"

Rick told him, and ten minutes later, Corporal Carmichael – now Sergeant Carmichael – Senora Valdez, and her children, were all aboard a helicopter being flown back to the flagship at top speed. The Mexican POW wasn't with them; he had held up his end of the bargain, so Rick kept his. The grateful soldier was running west toward the edge of town as hard as he could go, unharmed except for the hard kick in the ass the still-irritated Rayray gave him to start him on his way. Meanwhile Casey Graham placed an Irregulars Priority One call of his own to the man who, in the eyes of the Irregulars, would always be number one.

Frank listened, asking a few questions before ordering that Admiral Montgomery be patched into the conversation. After confirming everything he needed to know, the President thanked them and hung up, then immediately dialed Mike Dayton.

"I need to get a secret message through directly to the Mexican President."

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DAY 1105

CHAPTER 64

USA Internet Blog

USA_1st: The racist regime in the so-called "Confederacy," along with neo-communist Russia and radically nationalistic Japan that round out their axis of evil, is ethnically cleansing the territory they have stolen from Mexico even as you read this. Men, women and even children are being forced at gunpoint from the homes where they have lived for generations, loaded in trucks and cattle cars like the Nazis and Serbs did, and forcibly made to go to Mexican-held territory. We're talking about hundreds of thousands, millions of innocent people, forced into an already poverty-stricken, war-torn country, creating a humanitarian crisis of truly epic proportions!

The United Nations and the Vatican, as well as every civilized country on Earth has condemned this action, but no one seems willing to lift a hand to stop it. Why, I ask you; why?

Uncommon_Sense: Um, because they don't want a nuke up the ass, maybe?

USA1_st: You're willing to just sit there and let these Nazi racists threaten the world?

NOTpartoftheherd: Wait a minute; they're Nazis? I thought the article said they were Communists; make up your mind.

Uncommon_Sense: Last I checked, they weren't threatening the world, just Mexico. Besides, don't you think Mexico brought this on themselves by invading the CSA and killing and raping all those people?

USA_1st: Mexico was only trying to protect its people!

NOTpartoftheherd: If they were Mexicans, what were they doing in the CSA?

USA_1st: And there were no rapes and murders of civilians by Mexican troops! That's all Confederate propaganda!

Nokoolaide4me: And you know this to be true because...

NOTpartoftheherd: Why the US 'gummit' said so, so you know it must be true! :~)

The Southern Historical Observer

It had become nothing short of a race. The Confederates wanted the entire Gulf Coast; they held the Yucatan, Quintana Roo, and the northern Mexican states down into Tabasco, and the two fronts moved in from the north and south, intending to connect it all. The Chinese forces in Chiapas, on the other hand, wanted a direct route to the Gulf, as well as a foothold on that coast for its strategic and economic advantages. The key port of Isla Del Carmen in Campeche became the finish line for a desperate race between the two powers. The winner would not be the one who got there first, but the one who got there first with enough men to prevent the other from establishing ownership.

"Be careful! Stop where you are!"

Captain Chang of the Chinese People's Liberation Army Special Operations Forces instantly dropped to the soft earth of a Campeche bean field at the shout, out of learned instinct. The language had been Mandarin Chinese, but there was no way that atrocious accent was. The tone was also not aggressive, but alarmed.

Turning his head one way, then another, he was pleased to see his men had copied his actions, even if they were as puzzled as he was. The voice came again, and with it a horrific feeling.

"You're in the middle of a mine field."

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Chang heard someone – he thought it was his sergeant – swear under his breath, and he couldn't help but run his eyes over the ground around him, between the rows, looking for the telltale disturbed earth.

"Please hold still, and don't shoot at me; I'm going to step out where I can see, and remotely deactivate the mines in your section. It'll be just a minute."

The Chinese soldiers looked at one another; whoever this was, was he just going to let them through?

Chang sighed; nothing was ever simple in a war zone. Then the speaker stepped out and derailed his train of thought, making his eyes widen at first, then squint tighter.

The soldier – a Southerner, he supposed, swearing at the thought – looked like no soldier he had ever seen. For one thing the man was very young, and he had girlishly long hair tied like a horse's tail behind his head.

Militia, Chang thought, *not Marines.* While the Confederate Marines were allowed beards, they had strict haircut standards, ranging from high and tight to shaved, but the various state militias seldom did. He didn't take that lightly, however; he had been briefed on the latter, as they were the forces he was most likely to encounter on this mission, and that some of their units were as capable and as deadly as anything fielded by any national army in the world.

Idly wondering how much he had mangled the Chinese language he had taken a semester of in high school – "the language of business" they had called it – Rick Carmichael carefully observed the field, and began pressing buttons on the object he held, too far away for the Chinese to see clearly. It was an I-pod and it had nothing to do with mines; in fact, he was simply reordering his music list to look like he was doing something useful, because there were no mines, but the Chinese didn't have to know that.

"Okay," he finally called out, pocketing the device, "it's safe now, if you come directly forward in the direction you're headed, straight toward me. Please don't step off to either side, in order to avoid any accidents.

Chang looked at Lieutenant Tso, who shrugged his shoulders, clearly saying, *What choice do we have?* The Captain knew he was right; the Confederates obviously knew where they were, and if they had intended to attack them, they would have already done so. Besides, they *were* here to gather intelligence after all, and this would be an opportunity to do that. He gave the order, and he and his men rose cautiously to their feet.

"Come this way, please," Rick said, a smile on his face and his rifle slung over his shoulder, "We've been expecting you. The General sent me out to meet you and escort you through the lines to him; we're always happy to host our Chinese friends, and we don't want any accidents with the sentries." Seeing the officer's insignia, Rick saluted, then extended his hand once it was returned. "Lieutenant Carmichael, sir, 1st South Carolina Irregulars; welcome to Confederate territory."

Chang couldn't believe his eyes; how in the hell could the Confederates have gotten dug in so quickly?

Still, there was no denying what he saw; rows and rows of tents neatly laid out in perfect order, hundreds of soldiers exercising or standing guard duty, with everyone in a relaxed state of readiness. Helicopters and fighter jets were zooming back and forth overhead, and he could hear the diesel engines and see the military vehicles going by along the road in both directions. And in the middle of it all…

Who is this mad man?

Rick gestured toward the object of his guest's attention.

"Captain Chang, that's General Graham, our area commander."

Chang actually staggered.

Casey Graham well understood that soldiers hated things out of the ordinary, because the unpredictable couldn't be planned for; in fact, if something was unpredictable enough to appear crazy, it scared people. That's why he was standing on top of a Bradley Fighting Vehicle, alternately shouting into the radio and yelling profane commands to the men on the ground. Other than the tightly-laced combat boots that protected his feet from the hot steel, he was stark naked.

There were sharp intakes of air from the Chinese soldiers; not only was a naked man with half of one of his ears shot off something very unexpected, but Casey was also very hairy and unusually well endowed. Chang glanced at Rick, who simply waited patiently, acting like the scene was perfectly normal.

They're all insane!

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Once Casey's eyes swiveled toward him, Rick saluted and his "General" returned it before jumping agilely down off the Bradley, his boots raising puffs of dust when he hit the ground, flexing his powerful legs to absorb the impact.

"At ease. What the hell did you bring me, Lieutenant Carmichael?"

Rick seamlessly switched from attention to parade rest, and said, "Sir, I'd like to introduce Captain Chang, of the Army of the People's Republic of China."

Casey's face broke into a smile, and he saluted the Chinese officer, who was desperately trying to avoid looking at the Southerner's crotch.

"Captain Chang, a pleasure to meet you!"

Chang numbly returned the salute, and, when Casey stuck out his hand, he shook it, all the while wondering where it might have been.

"General…" he began, looking everywhere but downward, "…I didn't know anyone was here."

"Oh, we've been here for awhile now, digging in just in case it was the Mexicans who came across first instead of you. I see my lieutenant got you through the mine fields okay."

"Yes sir, thank you."

"Great." He suddenly looked down at himself, as if realizing for the first time what was bothering the foreign officer. "Sorry about the nudity, but the doctor said I should get more sun; vitamin D and all that. Lieutenant!"

"Yes sir?" Rick answered, and Casey nodded toward their guests.

"Show the Captain and his men to the officers' mess; supper will be ready in a few minutes."

"Sir," Chang began, still desperately keeping his eyes on the General's face, "I'm afraid I must report back…"

"Bullshit! The Chinese are our friends, and the least we can do is feed you first before we send you home. Southern hospitality demands it."

"But – "

"No buts. I know you've got a radio; go on and call your people, and tell them we'll be giving you a ride back to the Chiapan border at about, oh…" He paused, looking at his watch, "about twenty-hundred hours. Carmichael, take this officer somewhere he can use his radio in private, then get these men somewhere they can get cleaned up and ready to eat; time's a-wasting!" Then he spun and marched off, his arms and other assorted body parts waving while he swore a blue streak at a group of passing soldiers.

"Yes sir," Rick told him before turning to the Orientals, "If you'll follow me, sirs?"

They did, although every one of them cast a final glance at the General, only to see his hairy ass walking away, and all fervently hoped his custom of nudity would be foregone for supper.

Still, Chang was very much the professional, as was his second-in-command, Lieutenant Tso. While his Captain was talking, the pockmarked junior officer had carefully and unobtrusively observed what was going on around him. Although he couldn't tell on the jets and helicopters flying overhead, he had carefully noted the numbers and drivers' features on the passing military traffic continuing by on the road. Chang knew this, and as soon as Rick's back was turned, looked at his Lieutenant and cocked an eyebrow, only to see Tso shake his head and mouth the words, "All different."

The Captain blew out his breath; he would have bad news to report to his commander, which was never a good career move. Still, it was up to him to tell Colonel Lee that the Confederate Militia were already here in force, and that they were led by a certifiably mad General who was obviously capable of anything.

What the Chinese couldn't possibly have known was that there were only a dozen vehicles in the immediate vicinity, but Casey had pit crews of men stationed two miles away along the road in either direction with stencils and paint, changing the numbers on each one and rearranging the visible gear before swapping out the driver for a return trip, or that 90% of the tents and other gear, as well as the personnel, were the property of the Navy, not the Marines.

Chow Fat hated to be the bearer of bad news to the Premier, but it was his fate as chief advisor. He wasn't afraid of physical harm, particularly – after all, Mao's Revolution had been over a long time, and, unless one

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really screwed up that was not usually an issue – but it was never good to have your boss associating you with negative things.

Still, the little round-faced man who looked deceptively like someone's kindly grandfather showed no emotion as Chow delivered the news from Chiapas. He merely stared thoughtfully at him through his thick glasses until he had finished, then rose unhurriedly, turned his back, and went to the window behind his desk, looking out over Beijing.

"So," he said calmly, "the Russians and Japanese have beaten us to the Sea of Cortez, the Confederates have beaten us to the Gulf of Mexico, and now they are all signators of a formal alliance that, together, is more powerful than we are."

That observation didn't require an answer, as it was obvious. Instead, Chow offered some good news to help mitigate the mood.

"The Confederate diplomats have already contacted us; they assure us they continue to regard China as a friend, investor, and a valuable international business partner. They are also asking if we are interested in establishing a highway and/or railway from Chiapas to the Gulf and improving the port there, in exchange for which investment, they'll slice their normal transportation taxes and docking fees in half for all our goods and ships moving through there. We will still have direct trading access from the Pacific to the Gulf that way, albeit at a nominal fee."

Chow saw the Premier's head nod slightly, and without turning around, he said, "Tell them we'll do it in exchange for a reduction to 20% of their normal fees."

After Chow was gone, the Premier smiled. His victory wasn't total, perhaps, but it was definitely a victory nonetheless, as his country had ended up with far more than they had started with. They had Chiapas, a solid foothold in the New World, and, while they didn't have the Gulf Coast itself, they would have easy trading access to it, with a people whose intelligence and resourcefulness he had no choice but to respect, and who seemed at the same time to be straightforward and easy to get along with. They wanted to do business without trying to dictate how his country handled its own affairs; that made for a welcome change and a good partnership...for now, anyway. Who knew what the future would bring? For moment, though, it was enough, and the Chinese were a patient people, if nothing else.

"President Gore?"

"Yes, President Valdez?" Frank's voice held all the warmth of dry ice, so cold it seemed to burn all it touched.

Valdez shivered involuntarily; it was like talking to the Reaper himself. It took him a moment to find his voice. The proud Mexican was not a begging man, but there were some things that were worth any price. He knew whom the Confederates held, and that they were relatively unharmed because he had been allowed a brief phone conversation with them before this one.

"I..." He paused, swallowed hard, and tried again, but still couldn't quite get the high-pitched tension out of his voice. "I want my family back."

"I want my child back."

"Sir..." the Mexican said, squirming to fit into an impossible position, "please..."

"Are you ready to surrender and accept terms?"

Valdez blew out his breath in defeat. No doubt he was signing his own death warrant at the hands of his own countrymen, but as a husband and father, he had no choice. Besides, with the Confederates pushing down from the North and inward from the East, plus the Chinese wedging in from the South, it might be the only way he'd end up with any country left at all.

"Yes."

"Very well." Frank went on, tracing his finger over his map as he told him what he wanted, and the Mexican President's heart sank with ever word.

"That's...too much!"

"That's no more total land area than we would have lost to you if you had won, and at least I'm giving your people a chance to leave it instead of raping and killing them wholesale like your soldiers did in the

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Southwest! We already hold it, and every minute you delay, we'll be taking more, and we'll keep that too. You've lost this war, so unless you want to lose all of Mexico and everything else in an unconditional surrender, you will capitulate immediately. Once the papers are signed and the conditions are met, your family will be returned to you completely unharmed."

Valdez knew of Frank Gore's reputation, and he didn't think he'd actually harm Maria and the children...until he imagined what he would do if his own child had been killed in a similar manner, by people who had done what his troops did in the Confederacy. He realized then he had truly lost, and was extremely fortunate even to be offered terms instead of an unconditional surrender, so at least he could salvage something, both nationally and personally.

"I accept. Is there anything else?"

"Yes, there is. We'll both give orders for a ceasefire as soon as we end this phone call, and God help you if your side breaks it. Second, you will issue an order for the entire Mexican population in the territory we hold to vacate it immediately, within the next seventy-two hours. Third, you will notify the UN that this thing is settled, we have reached an agreement, and you don't want their troops in here exacerbating the situation. And fourth; I told you I wanted my child back. I know I can't have her, but I want every other White woman, from the South, North or wherever, back. Every last one of them is somebody's child!"

As Frank explained his last demand, it came almost as a relief to Valdez, merely because it was the simplest and least costly of them all.

"You wanted to see me, Colonel Dayton?"

Mike looked up at the big, bearded North Carolina militia commander-turned-Congressman with his lips set in a peculiar half-snarl, half-satisfied smile that Watis Suggs found vaguely disturbing. Before answering, he nodded at his lover.

"Cynthia, could you excuse us for a moment, please?"

Only after she had nodded and closed the door behind her did Mike speak.

"Yes. I wanted to be the one to tell you that Mr. Tarbox has been exhausted as an intelligence source, and is of no further value to us. You are the only one I've told this; only the two of us know at the moment."

Watis' teeth glinted through is beard, making him look like a hungry bear that had just come upon a crippled hog.

"Yes! Oh hell yes!"

"You might also want to know that I've told no one else about this because I wanted to give you the opportunity to handle the situation in whatever way you see fit."

Watis knew he had just been offered a gift he had been waiting for a long time. Once he recovered his voice, he stuck out his hand.

"I owe you a big one for this!"

"Good, because I want a favor in return. That son of a bitch not only betrayed you; he betrayed the Irregulars too, as you know all too well. I want them to be represented when things are handled."

Watis nodded and slapped him happily on the back before he hurried out of the room. Stopping in the outer office, he whispered briefly to Hodges and Drucci, the latter of whom ordered an additional detail of men to guard the war room, then set off down the hall with Watis at a fast pace, with a definite purpose in mind.

"Tarbox is dead," Watis told Frank and Samantha an hour later, "Mike notified me, and, on behalf of the Great State of North Carolina, I was taking custody of him for trial when he attempted to escape. He got in too big a hurry, and fell down a flight of stairs; killed him deader than hell."

"Colonel Drucci and I were assisting Colonel Suggs in the transfer, and were witnesses to the event, sir," Hodges added, and Drucci, standing beside him, nodded his agreement.

Frank said nothing at first, but simply looked over the three men, at the blood spatters that stained their boots, uniforms, hands, and even their faces, making them look like they had detonated a grenade inside a full bucket of paint. What had happened was obvious; he knew.

Samantha knew too. She began levering herself to her feet, and accepted Frank's assistance as he rose to

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help her. Then, eyes full of tears, she kissed each man's bloody cheek and said, “Thank you.” Once she finished, Frank shook each one's hand.

“Thank you all. I assume the body is not suitable for public viewing?”

“Not unless you've got a really strong stomach,” Drucci told him, and Watis nodded.

“No viewing for him, and no funeral either; I'd like to borrow a squad of reliable men – ”

“You'll have them,” Hodges said.

“– to go with me to escort the body to the nearest crematorium and wait while it is reduced to ash, which I intend to flush down the damned toilet myself.”

“Can you wait a few minutes first?”

“I reckon; Tarbox ain't going nowhere.”

“Good. I need you to stand with me again; I've got to make another speech.”

“What's happened?”

Frank nodded meaningfully at the scarlet stains on their clothing and said, “Put on a clean uniform and you'll find out.”

“The war is over.”

Frank looked squarely into the camera as he spoke, and a few of the more perceptive members of the TV audience noted that both his fists were clenched where they rested on the desk, and that the knuckles were white and quivering with tension.

“Mexico has sued for peace. One-half hour ago, I accepted their conditional surrender by phone from President Valdez. One part of those conditions is that the formerly Mexican territory we now hold is ours; it is now part of the Confederate States of America. We now own the entire Baja and Yucatan Peninsulas, as well as the states of Sinola, Chihuahua, most of Coahuila, Nuevo Leon, Tamaulipas, and all of Vera Cruz and Tabasco. We are also in possession of the northwestern quarter of Sonora, with the remainder of that state going to our Indian allies in the CNAN, in return for their help in halting the Mexican invasion. We have gained between one third and one half of what was once Mexico, including the entire Atlantic seaboard, along with the Baja Peninsula and the Sea of Cortez. Our Confederacy now stretches from sea to sea, from Atlantic to Pacific.

“I know some of you – many of you – want to continue this war still further; I want to do so myself, so badly I can taste it!” His face twisted in a snarl that left no doubt in any watcher’s mind that he meant exactly that, and it was only by sheer force of will he managed to wipe away the savage expression. “However, we need to face reality. Mexico attacked us, and we crushed them. Well over a million of the enemy are dead, their infrastructure has been destroyed, their military power has been neutered, and they have lost nearly half their land. After what they did to us, it is perhaps less than they deserve, but, for the sake of world opinion, and much more importantly, for the sake of God’s opinion, we must be merciful and accept their surrender. Just as importantly, we’ve already lost more than enough of our own; I won’t be responsible for creating still more widows and orphans in the Confederacy just so I can rub Mexico’s face in the dirt for my personal satisfaction. I have a responsibility to our people, and that takes precedence over my personal feelings, and my own desire for vengeance.

“Besides the land ceded to us – mines, oil fields, rich agricultural, industrial and tourist areas – Mexico also has one more treasure that I demanded be turned over to us as their price for peace, and for us letting them continue to exist, both politically and physically...”

When he finished, someone clapped, then someone else joined them, and finally virtually everyone was on their feet and applauding and rebel yelling, even those who had doubts. There may have been a lot of anger remaining, but there were few who doubted that his decision was the right one.

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DAY 1134

CHAPTER 65

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Confederate News Service

The Confederate Government named the project Operation Saving Angel, and, to many, many people, that's exactly what it has been. As part of the ceasefire agreement, over two thousand White women, mostly young, have been forcibly repatriated by the Mexican Government from Mexico's organized crime cartels where they have been held captive in sexual slavery, some of them for years.

These ladies, many of them scarred physically as well as emotionally, have been taken to an undisclosed, formerly Mexican-owned resort in Confederate-held territory, where they are resting and receiving comprehensive medical and psychological care while their identities are being established in order to contact their next of kin. Several church denominations are assisting in that effort, and many of them have representatives on the way, where they will be working within the facility itself, seeing to the freed captives' spiritual needs.

Most of the victims were kidnapped, often as teenagers, sold to Mexican gangsters, and forced into prostitution. As the First Lady, Samantha Gore, told the press, "They are the victims of rape over and over again, over weeks, months, and sometimes years!"

Because of their sensitive situation, President Gore had given the order to protect their privacy at all costs, and their facility is surrounded by elements of the Confederate Militia Forces with the full authorization to use deadly force to prevent any unauthorized access. Photographs are strictly forbidden, as is any media contact until their treatment is completed, and then only if the victims agree.

Many of the rescued women are from the United States, and a few are from Europe and elsewhere; however, they are being treated no differently from our own Southern ladies. Once they are well, they will be transported to their country of origin by the Confederate diplomatic corps. Those who do not want to return home for whatever reason will have their wishes respected, and they will be given new identities and resettled to begin a new life here in the Confederacy.

"*We will not abandon even one of them, regardless of where she's from!" Mrs. Gore declared, "This is Dixie, and that's not the way we do things here."*

Southern churches are already preparing for this eventuality, and have organized their membership to the extent that there are already far more sponsors waiting for these ladies than there are ladies to go around...

Rick Carmichael – now fully a lieutenant in charge of the platoon that was the security force for Operation Saving Angel's headquarters, thanks to Colonel Graham's field promotion just prior to his transfer – stood watching as Rayray directed the string of canvas-covered troop carriers off the street and into the resort's spacious parking lot. The volunteers had finally arrived, and he was damned glad to see them. Glancing at the windows and balconies, he could see several of them filled with rescued women looking out curiously, and the sight nearly made him break out in a sweat. He might not be very old, but he was old enough to know the trouble he would inevitably have with the militiamen under his command in an installation with two thousand women if they had to take direct care of them instead of simply providing the inner ring of security.

Of course, he couldn't really fault the people for the delay; they were volunteers who had flown into a war zone all the way from Dixie, and then ridden miles in the backs of trucks to get here, and their fatigue showed plainly. In fact, from the gray faces of some of the older ones, and the green faces of the carsick ones as they laboriously climbed down, he was worried a few of them might collapse on the spot.

"Sergeant Thacker," he called out the nearest non-com, "Get some men over there to help these people out of the trucks, and carry their stuff."

The Sergeant began shouting orders, and within a minute, every man not on guard duty was there lending a hand.

Rick stepped forward and raised his voice so he could be heard, "Who's your leader?"

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In a moment he was conferring with an elderly preacher out of Cross Plains, Texas, the male chief of a mostly female group. Rick extended his welcome and a hand to go with it.

"Welcome to Saving Angel Base, sir; Lieutenant Carmichael, First South Carolina Irregulars commanding." He felt weird saying it, almost like he was bragging just for stating his rank. It felt especially strange considering how he had been promoted, right after the Chinese left them in Campeche. He had offered the Lieutenant's bars back to Casey, only to get the response, "I didn't tell you to take those damned bars off, Lieutenant. Keep 'em; they look good on you!" All Rick had been able to do was stammer his thanks and salute.

I wonder if I'll ever get used to this!

"Reverend Edgar Pitts, young man; thanks for having us."

"Thank you for coming, Reverend. These ladies definitely need you and your people."

The old man's voice dropped to a whisper. "Are they bad off?"

"Not so much physically," Rick told him, matching his tone. He definitely didn't want the rescued women hearing this. "Most of them are coming off drugs, some of them have been abused pretty badly over the years, and the Good Lord only knows what they might be infected with after what they went through, but that's nothing compared to their mental state. Most of them…" He paused, swallowing a huge lump that came up in his throat before he could go on. "Most are either scared to death of everything, or don't seem to care about anything. I reckon their spirits are broken, and I really hope you can fix that for them."

Reverend Pitts patted him on the shoulder.

"I'm just God's nurse, son, but He's been in the business of fixing broken spirits for a long, long time. It'll be all right."

That statement was delivered with such confident assurance that Rick not only had no choice but to believe it, but it made him halfway wonder if the old man didn't have God over to his house for Sunday dinner on a regular basis. Still, he had to admit it made him feel better.

"Sergeant Thacker will show you all to your quarters, sir. Supper will be in two hours, which ought to give you time to get settled in from your trip. I'll introduce you then, and if you need anything at all, just ask any one of us, and we'll take care of it."

Sensing as much as hearing someone coming up behind him, he sent the man on his way inside, and turned to see who it was and what they wanted.

"Did you mean what you said on the phone?"

His mouth opened and closed several times, but no sound came out. Even his vision tunneled until all he could see was Tiffany standing there, dusty and a little disheveled in her shorts and tee shirt, holding a red duffel bag from a white strap slung over her shoulder.

"Tiff…"

"Surprised?" she asked before being crushed in his embrace, a grip she eagerly returned.

Finally letting her go, he held her at arm's length and shook his head.

"What in the world are you doing down here?"

"I'm a volunteer," she said with a nervous shrug that tried to be nonchalant but failed miserably, "I knew you were here, and besides, I figured that, after…after what happened to me in that camp, I might be more understanding of what these women are feeling. I also kind of hoped that maybe helping them would help me too. After all, I'm going to be a wife soon, and I need to get over some…*things* first, you know?" Suddenly she looked down and bit her lower lip to stop it from quivering. "Th-that is, if you still want me…"

It was Tiffany's turn to be surprised when Rick reached for his dog tag chain. As he pulled it out of his shirt, her eyes widened; she saw an absolutely *huge* diamond solitaire in white gold setting appear on the links next to the tab bearing his name, rank and serial number where he had been keeping it safe, waiting for her. Quickly unsnapping the chain, he slipped it off and held it up in his right hand as he reached for her left.

Tiffany's eyes got even bigger; the ring was incredibly beautiful and obviously outrageously expensive, like something a rich movie star might wear, not an orphaned country girl from West Virginia.

"Wh…where did you get that?"

"I traded for it," he told her. Actually, he had swapped the Mexican First Lady's gold plated pistol to one

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of the North Carolina Highlanders for it. During a firefight, the Tarheel had had the good fortune to get pinned down in the ruins of a high-end Mexican jewelry store, and had whiled away the time filling his kilt's utility pockets while he was waiting on air support.

Rick dropped down on one knee.

"I love you, Tiff," he told her, looking straight up into her eyes, "and I want you to be my wife. Will you marry me?"

She was still nodding and frantically trying to get out a 'yes' when he slipped the ring on her finger, and in the next instant, she was on her knees with him, holding him, rocking back and forth, and crying for joy.

Tiffany wasn't the only one; several of the rescued women watching from the windows were crying too, because they had just seen hope.

Richmond, Virginia

"President Gore," the Icelandic reporter, the first speaker at the emergency press conference, began respectfully but pointedly, "what do you intend to do about the atrocity in Texas?"

Frank kept his emotions in check with some difficulty. He knew the subject of the press conference; everyone knew it, and the actions of Colonel James Lamar Fannin had caused an explosion of controversy heard around the world.

Fannin had caught up with the Mexican unit that had raped and murdered its way through San Antonio, and demolished the Alamo itself, just for good measure. He had fought them, handily defeated them...and then executed every last survivor, totaling over two thousand prisoners of war. And the world wanted his blood for it. As for Fannin, he was willing to give it, but not that of his men; he had steadfastly refused to answer questions as to which militiamen took part in the atrocity, saying only that he and he alone shouldered full responsibility for it.

Frank had been told that political necessity required that the young militia colonel-turned-mass murderer be "thrown to the wolves" so to speak. The Confederacy's place in the world, its reputation, its very future, demanded it. He had no other choice; he had to do the expedient thing.

There was only one problem; Frank had seen the reports out of San Antonio, and knew what those particular Mexican troops had done. Fannin might have been many things, including a dupe of Tarbox and General Gaul, at one time perhaps even a borderline traitor, but Frank couldn't condemn his actions. He knew, under the same circumstances, he would have killed them all too, with no more mercy than the young officer had shown. After all, his wife had once done the same thing to a group of surviving US soldiers who were guilty of the same sorts of crimes.

Still, the others insisted, there was the good of the Confederacy to consider. It disturbed the hell out of them when Frank wouldn't agree, and, in fact, wouldn't give them a straight answer at all about just how he intended to answer the world. They'd just have to wait for it like everyone else.

Looking at the reporter, Frank simply said, "Nothing; Colonel Fannin and his acts are outside my jurisdiction."

The assembled press looked at one another in stunned silence until the reporter said, "Mr. President, could you please elaborate?"

"Of course. Colonel Fannin is not, was not, and never has been under the direct command of any elements of either the Confederate Naval Department or the Central Government whatsoever. He was and is an officer in the Texas State Militia, operating entirely on Texas soil under the direct command of the Texas Governor and under the authority of the Texas Government, and that makes the situation solely a Texas matter. It would be an egregious violation of both the Constitution of the Confederate States of America and the philosophy of states' rights we all hold dear for the Central Government, the military, or me to interfere in any way whatsoever."

"But...what will the Governor do?"

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Frank shrugged.

"You'll have to ask him that. Next question."

Behind him, Danny Drucci pressed a hand to his ear piece to hear better, and his face took on an expression of alarm. Quickly stepping forward, he whispered in the President's ear, and Frank's face went white.

"I'm sorry, ladies and gentlemen," Frank told them, "but I've got an emergency."

With no further explanation, he stepped away from the microphone, and somehow managed to keep from breaking into a run until he was out of the public eye.

Confederate News Network

Reports that First Lady Samantha Gore had been rushed to the hospital during a press conference in Columbia earlier today have been confirmed. An unnamed source said she was taken out the back door of the Capital, assisted by her husband, President Gore, and was whisked away by a military ambulance. No further details have been released at this time.

"So," Samantha told Frank while she gripped his free hand and he wiped the sweat from her forehead with a damp cloth held in the other, "here we go again."

Referring to the state-of-the-art hospital delivery room, with its sterile sheets, gleaming machinery, and hustling staff, he smiled and said, "Hey, at least I brought you to a better place this time, didn't I?"

Frank was happy, but he was worried out of his mind at the same time.

God, please! Let her and the babies get through this! Please! If you've got to have a life, take mine, not hers and not my sons'!

The hardest part was not letting his concern show on his face. He couldn't, for her sake, but he couldn't deny what he felt inside. They had been through so much – had lost so much – that the fear of losing even more, losing everything, was his constant companion. Over the past year or so it had taken to manifesting itself as anger, but that wasn't an option here. Instead, he smiled, looking as calm and confident as if he was watching her deliver a press release rather than their two sons.

Looking around at the delivery room and the double-sized staff of doctors and nurses waiting for the main event, and then back at her husband, whose feelings were transparent because they were her own, Samantha smiled as much as she was able.

"Yeah, it's better than a barn – *ugghn*!"

"Push!" the nurse told her, and she did, and felt the familiar pressure between her legs, along with the comforting pressure of her husband's hand in hers as she bore down and pushed with all her might.

Columbia Christian Radio

President Frank Gore and his wife Samantha, who will always be South Carolina's First Family, brought two more Southern sons into the world today: Thomas Richardson Gore and Jonathon Edge Gore. The hospital reports that both boys are healthy, and doing well. The President was at his wife's side throughout the delivery, and she is reported to be resting comfortably. Vice President Samuel Wirtz has been named the children's Godfather.

We at CCR ask that all our listeners, and all Southerners, give thanks to God that everything went well, and that this couple, who have given so much and suffered so much for the freedom of our country and for all of us, may be showered with the blessings of peace and joy...

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DAY 1137

CHAPTER 66

Texas News Service, Web Edition

Governor King has announced that Colonel James Fannin will not face a military court marshal after all, but will be tried by a civilian jury of his peers, selected by lot from Frio County, where the alleged crime took place, in accordance with the Constitution...

Comments:
Abracas said: "From Frio County?!! After the Mexicans came through there on their way to San Antonio, and what they did? Wouldn't that tend to bias the jury?"
2TallTexas said: "That's where the so-called "crime" he is accused of was committed, and he's a Texan, so those are his peers, so it sounds fair to me, not to mention Constitutional."
Leftocenter said: "This is just King passing the buck, just like Gore did, to avoid getting his hands dirty. You know those Texans will never convict him!"
Okboy said: "Well, DUH! I think that's the general idea."
2TallTexas said: "Convict him, hell! They ought to promote him!

Richmond, Virginia

"So...where are you going to do now?"

In spite of the doctors' orders, Sam was on crutches now, and they rested on the floor at his feet. He was seated on the sofa beside Victoria; he had been to visit Samantha and the twins, and he had come back to see her with the good news afterward that all was well, back to the home she had shared with Edge when he was still alive and loving her. The ghosts of that relationship were still so thick there they seemed to hang in the air like wisps of smoke, and it was those ghosts that forced him to change the subject.

Victoria merely shrugged, not looking at him. Since the end of the war she had been avoiding everyone, and suddenly Sam was there knocking on the door of the now-painfully empty luxury condominium overlooking the James River she had shared with Jonathon. Her fiancé's best friend sat at one end of the couch and she at the other, and he had just asked the question that had been on her mind since the explosion at Columbia.

"Go back to Russia, I suppose."

"Why?!" He exclaimed, visibly starting, "You have a home here!"

"I have a house," she replied, looking around the living room she had shared all too briefly with the man she had secretly loved for years, "not a home. A house is where you live; a home is where you have people who love you. Now that Jonathon is gone, I have no one here."

Sam's voice was so quiet, she almost didn't catch his words.

"Don't be too sure about that."

Her head jerked up and she turned her eyes to meet his.

"What do you mean?"

"What do you think I mean?" he growled, shifting his weight towards her, emphasizing what he had to say even as he bit back a grimace at the pain the movement caused him, "I'm not John, but I've still got eyes, and the sense to know a good woman when I see one."

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She remained silent for a moment, thinking.

"So you want me to stay because you think I'm a good woman?"

"You're not going to make this easy for me, are you?"

"Is anything worthwhile ever easy?"

He looked away for an instant, then shook his head and laughed.

"No, I reckon not; I should have learned that, if nothing else. Okay then, here goes.

"My wife passed away longer ago than I care to remember; the damned cancer took her, and I had to sit and watch her die day by day for almost two years. That did something to me inside, and I haven't felt much of anything of that nature towards anyone since. I've never really wanted anyone since...until the day John came waltzing in here with you."

Victoria's eyebrows raised in surprise.

"Really? You never showed it! Oh, you were kind and funny and protective, but you're that way with every woman. In fact, you were always more distant with me than with most; you almost seemed to be pushing me away. I never thought you even liked me."

"It was a hell of a lot more than 'like,' but what would have been the point of showing it?" He waved his hands helplessly, emphasizing the point he was trying to make. "I couldn't risk letting myself get too close to you; for the first time in my life, I couldn't trust my own self. It's not just that you were already taken, but John was like my brother. No matter what I felt for you, I couldn't even think about betraying him, even if you had been willing, and I knew better than that; you're not that kind of girl."

Her head bowed at his compliment, she scooted a little closer to him on the couch, not quite touching him, but not distancing herself from him either. Interlocking the fingers of her hands, she held them between her knees.

"What did you feel for me?"

Sam pursed his lips. He was more frightened than he'd ever been in combat.

Well, here goes! No guts, no glory!

"It's not what I did feel, but what I do feel. I'm in love with you, Vika; I have been ever since the first time I set eyes on you. Hell, I never thought it would happen to me again, but..." He spread his hands helplessly. "There you go."

Reaching out, she took hold of his left hand, pulled it to her, and clasped it tightly between both of hers.

"I think I may love you a little too, but I don't know yet. With all that's happened, it still hurts too badly to know what I'm really feeling, besides pain."

"I know the feeling. Still, I really wish you'd stick around until you find out for sure."

She grinned slightly.

"Are you wishing or asking?"

"I'm asking, smarty-pants," he told her with a chuckle, and she nodded, never releasing his hand.

"Then I'm staying...for a while, at least until I know for sure, one way or the other." A lone tear streamed down her cheek. "Could I ask you a big favor? I'm not ready for...anything, and not sure about anything, really, but..." Looking at him, she tried to make him understand. "Could you please just...hold me, just for a little while?"

Sam spread his arms in response, and said, "Come here, Vika."

She did, and let herself be enfolded while she laid her head on his chest and wept for a long time.

"Frank, I'm resigning as Press Secretary."

There! Samantha thought, *I said it!*

This was her last day in the hospital – anyone else they would have let go already, but with her, they were determined not to take even the slightest chance of screwing up – and, half-sitting, half-lying in her cranked up bed, she announced the decision she had been toying with for some time.

Frank cocked an eyebrow slightly in surprise, then opened his mouth, but she cut him off before he could speak.

"Yes, I'm sure, before you ask," she declared somewhat defensively, pulling the sleeping twins tighter to

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her breasts; she would have crossed her arms if they hadn't been there. He opened his mouth once more, and again she beat him to it.

"No, I won't reconsider. I know the Confederacy thinks it needs me, but I've given it enough." Looking at the boys and how they reminded her of her daughter, the tears began to flow, although she refused to allow herself to sob. "I can't give anymore, Frank; I *won't* give anymore! I'm done with all the wars and killing and government and politics; I'm done with *all of it*!" Shifting the twins slightly to emphasize her words, she said, "This is my life now, these babies and my husband. This is my career." Seeing him simply staring, eyebrow still cocked, she asked, "Well? What have you got to say?"

"That depends; are you going to be quiet long enough for me to get a word in edgewise?"

She blushed a little and looked down, suddenly embarrassed.

"Yes," she said in a tiny voice.

"Good. Now, what I was *going to say,* before you went to running off there, was to ask whether you can drink champagne now that the babies are born?"

"Champagne?" She frowned. "Why would you want to drink champagne?"

"To celebrate the decision I've been hoping and praying you'd make for awhile now." He grinned that infectious grin of his. "This way at least half of this family will be normal."

Her pretty lips worked back and forth several times before she could actually get any sound to come out from between them.

"Why didn't you say something?"

"I tried, but you kept interrupting me."

"No, I mean earlier, when you first started thinking about it!"

"Because you were a journalist long before you met me, and I know how much your career means to you. I was not going to pressure you to try and make you give up something you love."

The tears were flowing faster now, but she was smiling broadly when she said, "Lean down here and kiss me."

Dutifully but with real pleasure he did, and, once he finished, she said, "I'll still be your First Lady, at least."

"You always have been, and always will be."

She nodded happily, unable to speak for a moment. Finally she managed, "I don't think the champagne will hurt one bit, at least one little glass. What will we drink to? The Confederacy?"

"Huh-uh, not this time. This time, we'll drink to us." Shaking his head as the past swept by in all its violence, blood and terror behind his eyes, he added, "I think we've earned it."

They almost didn't answer the phone when it unexpectedly rang, but once they did, they had something else to celebrate.

Dixie Daily News

Dixie's First Lady Samantha Gore was the subject of two big stories today. First, she resigned from her post as Press Secretary in order to become a full-time wife and mother to her new twins, a decision that, considering what she and her husband have been through, is not totally surprising. The real shock came when she was approached by major publishing house with a request to write her memoirs, along with the offer of a $50 million advance.

Both President and Mrs. Gore agreed, but, as she stated by phone from her hospital bed, only on the grounds that the manuscript would not be submitted for publication until after the election and the next President is seated.

"*Things happen in war," she said, "and usually they're not good things. We've just fought two wars; I think we ought to wait until we get a taste of peace and normality, until we have a real government elected by the states and the people, before we go back and look at those bloody pages once more."*

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As Mrs. Gore has been a leading player in the struggle for our country from start to finish, there is no question that she 'knows where the bodies are buried,' so to speak, and, due to her noted dedication to the truth, she can be expected to tell it. No doubt that many of those with political ambitions are heaving a sigh of relief at her announcement of the delay.

Following her statement, President Gore announced that, for the remainder of his term, he would forgo his entire salary, directing it instead to the fund for the widows and orphans of the Sailors, Marines, and militiamen who gave their lives in the two wars to make the Confederate States of America free, and to keep it free.

Confederate Veteran's Daily E-News

Vice President Wirtz announced today that all Militiamen and Confederate Naval Department personnel who served on active duty during the current conflict are eligible for land grants in the new Mexican territories acquired by the CSA. The land parcels – whose size is yet to be announced – will be apportioned by lottery.

All eligible servicemen must make application for these grants within thirty days, and any left unclaimed shall revert to the Central Government for sale. The grants may be retained by their winners, or sold or given only to any person who is either a citizen or legal permanent resident of the Confederate States of America; no grant sales to foreigners are allowed. Real estate companies are already scrambling and new ones being formed specifically to meet the expected turnover rate, and it is hoped that the sales of many of these grant properties will produce a cash infusion that will boost the Confederacy's economy noticeably.

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DAY 1140

CHAPTER 67

Confederate News Service

Before the dust has even managed to settle following the War with Mexico, President Gore is already going about the people's business. In fact, that's what his newest law is all about: business and taxes, and both critics and supporters of the effort agree that it will quickly reshape the Confederacy.

"If you are an individual," the President said, "or you own a business with branches only in one state, then you won't be paying taxes to the Central Government. No more IRS as far as you're concerned, and no regulations from our end; in fact, unless you're in the service or are a government employee, you'll have no more contact with us than you want. When you live in one state, or do business in one state, you follow that state's labor and business rules and pay that state's taxes – period. Richmond will collect what it needs from the states; each state will pay ten percent of what it takes in to support the Central Government of the Confederate States of America that they're a part of, but the individual or small business will owe nothing." Then, with a smile, he joked, "Of course we are going to begin bond sales and a national lottery, and donations will always be gratefully accepted."

For interstate and international business, however, it will be another matter entirely.

"If you have a large business, one with offices in more than one state or overseas, and have more than a dozen employees, you will fall under Central Government regulation, as well as the regulations of the states you're doing business in. You will be assessed a flat 10% tax on net profits, and you will pay your workers a living wage that will allow those wage earners to live decently and raise a family, and you will provide them with safe, reasonable working conditions."

Several people – most of them connected with big retail chains – immediately accused President Gore of being anti-business and even of being a Socialist, but he shrugged off their complaints.

"Some business have accused me of going mad, and that may be, but there is a method to my madness.

"Part of the Central Government's job is to promote the general welfare, and the general welfare is not promoted by multi-state and multi-national giants undercutting and driving out the small businesses and farms that are the backbone of our country. The general welfare is not promoted by wages being driven down to third world levels, so much so that both parents have to work two or three jobs, and can't even raise their own children. The general welfare is also not promoted by corporate feudalists who buy and sell politicians and political power like they buy and sell stocks, and crush the will of the Southern people under an avalanche of their dollars, like the traitors who backed the late Congressman Tarbox. That might be business as usual in the United States, but it's not going to fly in Dixie! No business here will ever be allowed to become more powerful than the State and Confederate Governments who represent the people, because, ultimately, it is our people who matter most. They, not the geography and not the government, are the Confederacy.

"We must neuter the power of the giant corporations for another reason, one that may be even more important – local diversity. South Carolina is not Virginia, which is not Texas, which is not Tennessee; every state is different. Their business climates should reflect those differences, and mirror the people of those states and their own unique cultures, not be reduced to nothing but a cookie cutter sea of identical mega-marts and strip malls."

This isn't expected to adversely affect industry – indeed, several manufacturers have already welcomed it, as they'll be paying fewer taxes than before and won't have to do the bookkeeping for employee payroll

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deductions – or the grocery stores, many of which are already unionized, but there is no doubt it will have a tremendous impact on the giant department store retailers and fast food establishments, who will have to begin paying their employees a real wage for a change. Their prices will have to reflect that, bringing them more in line with their small, state-level competitors, unless their stockholders are willing to make do with a lot fewer dividends.

Some major retailers have threatened to pull out of the CSA altogether, which the President admitted would cause some economic hardship, but he stressed that it would only be short term.

"Yes, if the big mega-marts leave, it will cause a few problems, but only temporarily. Like the natural environment, the business environment abhors a vacuum. Every gap they leave in the system is just another opportunity for another business to step in and fill it, even if only one man with a dream has to start it, and start it they will.

"I think though, that those large businesses who stay will gain an important benefit they are overlooking right now; quality employees. By paying a real, living wage, they will become attractive enough to snag the very best, most motivated job applicants, rather than simply being the last resort for those who have exhausted all other possibilities before applying there."

President Gore also stressed that businesses would no longer be defined solely by their corporate letterheads, but also by their ownership.

"If one man owns controlling stock in the same type of businesses in multiple states, then the Central Government will consider it an interstate business and treat it accordingly."

Of course, it's not only business that is impacted; labor unions will also be somewhat limited by the move. When it comes to mines, factories, and other establishments located in a single state, they will have to work within that particular state's rules only, rather than relying on Federal laws making blanket decisions that affect several states at a time. Further, the wage and working conditions the President has implemented for interstate corporations, and international companies doing business in the CSA, will answer many if not most existing workers' complaints, and are predicted to make further unionization somewhat difficult.

Reaction has been mixed, and the opposition from both businesses and unions has been loud, with noisy but peaceful protests popping up in half a dozen states. Still, a poll taken following his announcement revealed that 62% of Southerners solidly supported the action, while only 29% opposed it, with the rest undecided, adopting a wait-and-see attitude. Probably the most telling opinion this reporter heard was delivered by a septuagenarian at the coffee shop where I eat breakfast on the way to work. When I asked him what he thought about it, he just smiled and shrugged.

"I don't trust either business or the government, but I trust Frank Gore. He'll do right by Dixie. He has so far, hasn't he?"

That's a really hard sentiment to argue with…

Richmond, Virginia

"Frank, can I talk to you for a minute?"

Frank grinned at Billy, standing nervously in the doorway, and gladly set aside yet another piece of the tedious, endless stream of paperwork he had been laboring at.

"You never have to ask, Big Man. Have a seat."

Samantha, twins in hand for her daily visit to her husband's office, asked if she needed to leave so the two men could talk privately.

"No Sammie; I trust you too," he said with such seriousness that she couldn't help but laugh.

Billy sat, making the chair squeak, and looking as nervous as the proverbial whore in church. That wasn't at all normal for the big, brash man with a personality as big as he was, and it concerned Frank enough that he spoke first.

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“What’s on your mind?”

Squirming, Billy said, “I’ve...I’ve been working on somethin’, and I’d like to get an honest opinion on it.”

“I can give you that. What is it?”

“It’s...here.” He extended a large manila envelope across the desk.

Frank opened it and drew out a series of computer-generated drawings and spec sheets. The pages depicted an entire line of motorcycles, from commuters to cruisers to high-performance sport bikes. Their commonality was that they were all ultra-streamlined, their entire frames, motors, and even forks encased in a closely-fitting, aerodynamic housing.

“Wow!” was all Frank could say. An occasional hot-rodder in his youth, he'd always appreciated a good-looking machine. Peering over his shoulder, Samantha remarked, “My God, Billy...these are beautiful!”

Billy blushed deeply at their compliments.

“Cynthia made it up for me; she’s the expert on how to use the art programs. I’m not very good at it – I’m not too smart, and my fingers are too big for delicate stuff – but she managed to clean up my original pencil drawin's.

“They're all hybrids,” he went on, “with a high-performance electric motor, a state of the art battery bank set low at the bottom of the frame to keep the center of gravity down, and a tiny gas engine to charge the battery when it gets low, so it can charge on the fly instead of havin' to stop to plug it in. Of course, the battery unsnaps with two little catches, so you can take it inside and charge it if you'd prefer, or you could even carry another one for a spare, I guess.”

“I love that body design,” Samantha said, “It looks mean, almost like a blade.”

“That's what I'm thinking about calling it; the Blade. I figure that will keep it aerodynamic enough to make up for the little bitty charging motor. But check this out.” Reaching across, he flipped one of the pages. “See, when you stop, you can fold the outer panels – I figure they can be made of aluminum, carbon fiber, or maybe even titanium for the high-end models to keep the weight down – out on either side, and they've got solar cells on them, so it can be charging for free when you're not riding it.”

He looked hopeful, but Frank kept reading until Billy finally asked, “Well? Do you think it has possibilities?”

There was excitement in Frank’s voice when he answered by saying, “Let’s get Mike down here, what do you say?”

Trusting his friend, Billy said “Okay.”

It took Mike all of fifteen minutes evaluation and Internet searching for existing high-tech batteries and motors to suggest bringing in, first a patent attorney, then an engineer.

“I'll have to save up some money first,” the big man began, but Samantha caught Frank's eye and, when he nodded his understanding, she spoke.

“We'll underwrite that and the construction of the prototype.”

“No,” Billy declared firmly, with more than a hint of wounded pride, “I ain't takin' charity!”

“That's right, you're not taking charity; you're trading me stock in a company that I think is going places in exchange for us helping you get it off the ground.” He looked at the images again. “Besides, I want one of these bikes!”

“I'll do the same if you'll let me,” Mike told him, “I'll find an engineer, find the parts and fabricators you need, and help design the computer system if you'll cut me in on some stock in return.” He added with a grin, “Any chance you could work up a three-wheeler model too?”

“You all are just doin' this because it's me!”

Frank smiled and said, “We're doing it because we think this concept will take wings and fly, and all of us will be making money hand-over-fist by the time you're done.”

“You know most companies like this fail!”

“Not this one; it's a great concept and, after all, we believe in you, Big Man.”

Billy could do no more than nod quickly in thanks before getting up and quickly leaving so no one would see his tears.

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The concept was patented, a series of electrical and mechanical engineers were brought in and, equally impressed, each one of them brought in other specialized help to continue tweaking the design. The first prototype was built. Archer Neil, who also handled the President's, First Lady's, and Vice President's business and real estate investments while in office, was appointed as company attorney; he brought in still more investors, and a few months later, the Blade Motorcycle Company was launched, with its first assembly line built in an abandoned steel factory in Huntington, West Virginia.

As a part of its high standard of quality control, every single bike was road-tested for a hundred miles on the streets and highways before being put up for sale.

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DAY 1149

CHAPTER 68

Frank leaned on the podium and looked out at the governors seated in the Asheville conference room; one man, the appointed head of each state, and no one else. The governors' conference was private for a reason, because, as the German leader Bismarck once said, “Any man who loves either the law or sausages should never watch either one being made.”

Frank knew they were making laws here, and about to grind up the old way of doing things like sausages; not for the same of change, but for the sake of the Southern people. The end would be worth the means, but the process, like the Revolution that led them to it, would not be pretty, nor would it be for the squeamish or faint of heart.

Dixie is not going to be like the United States, constantly claiming to be the greatest country in the world to live in; it is actually going to be the greatest country in the world to live in!

Frank was not a vain man; on the contrary, he was sometimes humble to a fault. However, serving both under Jonathon Edge and over his own command had taught him the use of power, and now that he had it, he wasn't the least bit shy about using it to do what he had to do.

“Eventually, your states will be running their own affairs, but that time is not yet. Our priority here is to give everyone a start, and put everything on a level playing field. What happens after the elections will be up to the politicians, and to the people, and what they're willing to let you get by with.

“Simply put, I have a statement of intent and purpose here that each of you will sign, in order to protect the rights of the people and the good of the society and the nation, and gentlemen, those rights and that good *will* be protected.”

Pausing to turn to the second page of his notes, just in case he needed a reminder, he began.

“First and foremost, we have to protect our race itself; this is Southern land, and I intend it to remain Southern for our children and grandchildren until the very end of time. To paraphrase the Reverend Robert L. Dabney, we cannot mix the blood of the heroes of Manassas with that of the fens of Africa and still be Southern. From this point onward, Black and White miscegenation will be strictly illegal in Dixie, as it is detrimental to the country and causes irreparable harm to both races.”

He had to wait several seconds for the cheering to die down so he could be heard. Like him, most of the governors had no real hatred for Negroes, at least on a personal level, but they also understood the problems that came with them, and the traditional Southern attitude that was bred in the bone, and that this was what it would take to secure their country in the long term. Besides, it shouldn't be too much of an internal problem as the majority of the Blacks remaining in the Confederacy were elderly; most of the young ones had gone north, voluntarily or otherwise.

“Secondly, homosexuality is not part of our White Christian culture; it's not part of any normal culture, or any normal mindset. Call it a mental disorder, call it a crime, call it what you will; it is a cancer in our society that needs to be discouraged. We don't need a bunch of perverts groping and slobbering all over each other in the streets in front of our children; what we need are normal Southern people making more Southern babies to fill this great land of ours. And on that last note, I expect your state codes to do everything they can to encourage our people to have more children, just as God intended.

“Next, that brings us to the natural rights of parents. This clause is a statement; children belong to the parents, not to the state. They cannot be removed from parental custody except for egregious abuse, not because the parent administers reasonable corporal punishment or other ordinary methods of discipline, and never because the parents are simply poor. At no time will any state ever make a business out of taking children away from the natural parents. That stuff may have happened under the US Government, but it will not happen under that of the Confederacy.

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“Further, parents shall have the right to choose the best method of education for their children, and that includes homeschooling.”

None of the governors were overly bothered by this; after all, the previous abuses of parental rights had driven many people into the Third Revolution to begin with.

Frank turned another page.

“Then, gun rights; every citizen of the Confederate States of America who is not a violent felon will be allowed to buy, sell, and possess any standard small arms – rifles, pistols, shotguns, assault weapons, etc. – period. No registration, no regulation. After all, the militia is our army, and the people are the militia. If we can't trust them with guns, that's *our* fault, not theirs.”

That one brought cheers and clapping.

“Now we come to property rights. First, for travelers: we will be relying on the Dred Scott Decision. Even though something may be illegal in one state, no one passing through that state, or visiting someone there, will be deprived of any personal property he has with him, provided he does not use it in that state. For instance, Kentucky has legalized marijuana, while North Carolina has not. North Carolina will not be able to prevent a visiting Kentuckian from possessing it while passing through or visiting his cousin on the Outer Banks, providing he does not use it there, or deliver it illegally into the possession of a legal resident of that state. If you're worried about someone using it illegally in your state, you can put a seal on it upon entry.

“Further, the 'stop and steal' raids carried out by police departments under the former government are over and done with. Anyone seizing money or whatever from out-of-state travelers simply because he's carrying more than they think he should have will be in violation of the law I'll be signing this week concerning the theft of goods in the process of interstate transport, and will be seeing the inside of a Confederate prison, be he private citizen or law enforcement officer.

“Now we come to eminent domain. You'll set your own laws for that, but you'll do so under this agreement, meaning that anyone whose property is seized will be compensated with the fair market value of that property, which shall be enough to acquire a comparable property in a comparable area.”

There was some murmuring at that, but Frank cut it off.

“If you want to do whatever it is with that property badly enough, then it's worth paying for. Now, to continue.” The paper rustled as he turned another page.

“There will be no more personal property taxes. No man in the Confederacy holds his property at the pleasure of the king; it is his, and while you may tax his profits when selling it or his price when buying it, you have no right to force him to continuously pay for what is his, bought and paid for.”

“Good God, General!” one of the governors exclaimed, but Frank cut him off.

“Further,” he continued, spearing the interrupter with a glare that instantly made the man slam his teeth together, biting off the rest of whatever he was about to say, “no man's primary residence and the standard lot it sits on my be taken away from him for unpaid taxes, lawsuits, bankruptcy, or any of this homeowners association BS some of your states are so fond of. You can take his money, his business, the rest of his lands, but his home is his castle, and unless he has used it as collateral in a loan he has defaulted on or is using it directly in the commission of a major felony – a felony he is convicted of, by the way, not merely accused of – he will retain it. Period.

“Finally, property owners do have the right to decide who they sell property to, and communities have the right to covenants that allow them to segregate themselves from other groups as they see fit.

“Now for other tax issues. There will be no sales taxes on fresh foods or prescription medicine; no one in the Confederacy will be taxed just so they can survive. The food tax reform in particular will also have the added attractions of giving an advantage to local agriculture and of promoting the health, and thus the productivity, of the general public. You can make up the difference by adjusting the taxes on preserved foods, luxury foods, income, whatever.

“I see many of you squirming, so let me reassure you; this does not have to reduce your tax base by a large percentage. This simply means you have to work harder, and be more creative.”

“That's easy for you to say!” the Texas Governor muttered, his mustache bristling, and Frank grinned. He had been hoping one of the assembled politicians would bring that up, so South Carolina's Governor wouldn't

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have to. Frank had already briefed Governor Carter to do so if necessary, because someone had to point it out so Frank could make his point.

"No, Governor King, that's not easy for me to say. Remember that the Central Government's income is based in large part on that of the State Governments. I'm affected by this decision, just as you are; I may be captain of this ship, but we're still all in the same boat."

Neither King nor anyone else had an answer for that.

"Now we come to the legal system, and we all know the one we inherited is flawed beyond belief. We can try to straighten it out by legislation – we *will* try – but much of the work is going to have to be done by the people themselves. In order to accomplish this, each and every state is going to have a fully-informed jury law. What this means is that every jury has the right to judge not only the defendant, but the law itself. If they believe the law to be either unjust or simply unjustly applied, they have a duty to acquit or to find him guilty of a lesser crime. If, on the other hand, they feel the defendant is guilty of another or a greater crime than the one he is charged with, they have the right to find him guilty of that crime. Every juror shall be informed of that law before retiring for deliberation, and to have a copy of the laws in question upon request. Any judge who refuses to follow these procedures will be removed and brought up on charges of violating his office.

"As to the Central Government's legal system, we will stick entirely to interstate and international crimes and civil litigation; we're not second-guessing the outcome of your state cases, *unless* one state's government files an appeal on behalf of one of its citizens in legal trouble in another state. Then, and only then, will the Central Government's courts get involved and have precedence, as part of its duty is to insure domestic tranquility between its member states.

"I can also assure you that the Confederacy is not going to become as lawsuit-happy as the US. If someone doesn't suffer any real damages beyond simple hurt feelings, he does not collect any money – period. A common sense clause will be inserted into both Central and State Government law stating that, if someone gets hurt because he failed to use common sense – in other words, through his own stupidity – no one owes him a dime. The same thing for anyone injured while trespassing or in the commission of a crime; sorry about your luck. Further, courts shall not have to tolerate frivolous lawsuits; anyone doing so may be charged with contempt of court, or, after being found to have instituted multiple frivolous suits, may lose his right to sue for a period of time. Any lawyer who makes it a habit of bringing them may be disbarred.

"Now we come to the most contentious item of all: voting rights. Eventually, you'll set your own, but for now, until the first election is over in a little less than five years, this is the model you will use.

"Any citizen of your state who is at least eighteen years old and literate and fluent in English, may register to vote, *provided* that he is either serving in the militia, the Confederate Naval Department, doing volunteer work with the civilian auxiliaries of either group, or has actively served either in combat or support during the Revolution or during the Mexican War."

He heard several gasps, and saw one or two mouths start opening in protest before slamming shut at the realization of just what he had given them.

"I see you understand what that means. We don't need freeloaders and parasites deciding our future; we had enough of that under the US, and you know where that got us. The whole – be it your state governments or the Confederacy overall – has a responsibility to the parts, but the parts also have a responsibility to the whole; it's a two-way street. You know the condition our country is in; there is a massive amount of work to be done, and most of it can be done by local volunteers. If someone is not willing to pitch in and help build Dixie into the best country on the face of the Earth, a country we can be proud of, if he is not willing to work for it and fight for it, then we would be damned fools to give him a voice in running it, simply by virtue of geographical birth!"

Frank didn't see who started it, but an instant later the whole room was on their feet, cheering him.

Official communique, Virginias Emergency Military Commander, Congressman Jack Boggess, to the people of both Virginias

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The war is over, and both Virginias can be proud. We stood together as I promised we would, and secured our northern border. Brave men from both sides of the mountains did their duty and more; I couldn't be prouder.

Because of the cooperation we have shown one another, because we were once one state and are still one people, I am using the power vested in me to call for a public referendum on reunification. We've been apart for far, far too long!

By reunifying, we not only make right an illegal, unconstitutional action taken long ago, but we will help ourselves today as well. Think of the advantages to industry to locate in a state that has the unparalleled natural resources a reunified Virginia can offer, as well as ports on both the Atlantic and Ohio, with only one set of state taxes, licenses, and rules to abide by. I've spoken to companies wanting to do that right now, bringing in tens of thousands, maybe even hundreds of thousands of good, high-paying jobs. Think of the tourism opportunities where, in a single state, you can fish for bass in the Ohio and sailfish in the Atlantic, where you can raft the wild mountain rivers one day and surf the ocean waves the next...or even that very same day! I've already spoken to some foreign investors who are willing to build a modern, high-speed passenger rail system that will take you from Charleston to Richmond in only two hours, IF we unify – think of that!

There are two capitals – fine. The legislature can meet twice a year, once in one and once in the other, or alternate between years, with the vacant one at the time acting as the government's annex in that area for the convenience of the people. This is the modern age, the age of computers, phones, television, and easy travel – especially with the high-speed rail. These mountains we all love are no longer a barrier between us. In fact, nothing stands between us now but our own inertia, and whether we'd rather cling to the mistakes of the past, or seize a far brighter future for our children.

In the days when it was whole, Virginia was the wealthiest state, often called the Queen of States and First Among Equals. We can make it that way again, because, reunited, we can turn our state into the single greatest state in the Confederacy, bar none!

I cannot make a decision like this for you; you, the voters, will have to make it yourself. Do you really want to continue things as they are, as they have been for far too long, or are you willing to be a part of something better, something our ancestors once knew, something greater than anything you ever imagined? Are you willing to build a bright future, a future of security and unlimited opportunity for your children? After all, in the end, as President Gore said in Columbia, that is what it's all about!

I told you at the beginning of this last war that, on that terrible night, we were all Virginians, and there is only one Virginia. That was true then, and it is true now. It's past time to shake hands and make up, because that's what families do...that's what brothers do...that's what Christians do.

I'll see you at the polls.

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DAY 1295

CHAPTER 69

Official Directive to all offices and agencies of the Confederate States of America Central Government

Whereas the measure for the Virginias reunification vote passed the referendum during the special election in those two states, and we have been notified by the Governor and Congressman of the reunified state that the said reunification has been completed, all future applicable Central Government documents, announcements and procedures shall reflect that change, and the designation and/or number of states in all future official publications, maps, websites, etc. shall be altered to conform to the changes.

Columbia News Service

The book is being closed on one of the saddest chapters in our country's history today as grim search for victims in Columbia has officially ceased. The end tally was 28,363 injured, 9782 sets of remains recovered, and 58 are still missing; among the latter are President Edge, Vice President MacFie, and President Gore's daughter, Linda.

President Gore has requested that the entire area be set aside for a memorial, and Governor Carter has agreed.

"The Capital and most of the surrounding buildings were damaged beyond repair anyway," Governor Carter told reporters today, "and we can rebuild a short distance away. This is hallowed ground now – hallowed twice over, first by the struggle that sparked the Revolution and afterward by the cowardly attack that took so many of our loved ones away from us. This is no longer a place for business as usual."

With his wife, South Carolina State Medical Examiner Dr. Kathy Yonker-Carter standing by his side, the Governor issued an open invitation to artists and architects from all over the South to submit design suggestions, and asked for volunteers from every state to aid in the work once it begins.

"All Southerners are welcome to share in this effort, for all of us, every state, spilled our precious blood right here, in pursuit of the dream of independence, the dream of sovereignty, the dream of liberty! This is no longer simply South Carolina territory; this piece of ground was bought and paid for by the blood of the entire Confederacy!"

There is no doubt that the tourist dollars such an attraction is bound to bring to Columbia will help repair and rebuild the heavily-damaged city, but they'll have plenty of competition. Richmond is expanding their already-famous Monument Avenue as well, adding to their collection of statues of President Edge, 'the Virginia Re-unifier' Congressman Jack Boggess, and several other Virginia heroes of the Revolution. They were going to build the first non-Virginian monuments to President Gore and the First Lady as well, but the President asked them to at least wait until he was out of office, as "it wouldn't look right," although most Southerners would have no objection whatsoever.

Charleston Naval Base, Charleston, South Carolina

United States Navy Lieutenant Peter Gandy looked up from his bunk when he heard the guard coming. Despite being in a Confederate military brig, he wasn't particularly afraid; of course, as a SEAL, he'd never admit to being afraid of much of anything.

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It doesn't mean it never happens though!

The sliding door that covered the food slot slid open with a bang, and the guard's voice spoke with the Southern drawl he had become accustomed to during the past months.

"Lieutenant, please come to the door, turn your back, and put your hands through the slot."

As he obeyed the now familiar drill, facing the rear of the cell and feeling the cold steel of the cuffs being ratcheted closed around his wrists, he wondered what was going on.

It's not time for my exercise yet.

Still, he didn't ask. For one thing, it would make him sound weak and dependent, and besides, he'd find out soon enough anyway.

He wasn't overly worried at the moment; the Confederates had treated him much better than he had expected. He was only taken from his cell for an hour each day, for a brief period of solitary outdoor exercise, but no one mistreated him; in fact, the guards were scrupulously polite, and some were even friendly and generally willing to stop and shoot the breeze, even while paying close attention to security, maintaining a safe distance, and leaving no question but that they would shoot him in a heartbeat if he even looked like he was trying to escape. The small cell was comfortable enough, with a Bible provided and other books, magazines, and newspapers available for the asking, and the radio, of course. It wasn't actually in his cell, but was rather piped in from a central location in the brig, carrying a local South Carolina station that played a variety of music interspersed with hourly news segments. It was on twenty-four seven, but his captors had thoughtfully provided a volume switch on his cell speaker so he could turn it off when he wanted to.

He heard the lock clang, and a hand holding the cuffs guided him backwards as the door opened. While one guard maintained his grip on the hand restraints, another one put shackles around his ankles while a third watched, out of reach.

"Okay, sir, come with us."

Walking with a gray uniform on either side and another one behind, he clinked and clanked down the hall, taking short steps to keep from being brought up short by the chain. Frowning, he noticed that he was being taken the opposite direction from the exercise yard.

Maybe they've finally decided to get around to it.

Gandy's biggest surprise was that the Confederates had never seriously interrogated him, beyond his initial interview immediately after his unit surrendered, in which he gave his name, rank and serial number, and answered some innocuous questions about his health, medications, allergies, and the like.

Of course, he supposed there wasn't much point in them asking anything else, since, according to the Confederate broadcasts he had been listening to day after day, they already knew what the SEALs were doing there. The broadcasts also informed him that the United States had refused to apologize for the incident, or even officially acknowledge that the POWs existed. That wasn't unexpected, but it really galled his ass, just the same.

When his guards turned left and led him through a pair of double doors into a large mess hall, he stumbled in surprise. Eighteen other SEALs were sitting there, widely separated, each at a different table with his own contingent of guards. He immediately recognized his own squad and nodded to them, and they returned the gesture; it was the first time since their capture that they had seen each other.

Looking them over as closely as he could as he was led past, he was pleased to see that they all looked in very good health, just like he was. He really wanted a chance to talk to them, but it was obvious that wouldn't be allowed when the guards seated him at yet another table, a good twenty feet from the nearest man. All they could do was look around at one another, an activity that was interrupted when a Confederate Naval Lieutenant entered the room and stepped up to the podium. The officer looked around at them to make sure he had all their attention, and then began.

"You all are about to receive a Christmas present..."

Official Communication from the Revolutionary Government of the Confederate States of America, delivered via the International Red Cross

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In the spirit of the coming holiday, each prisoner's immediate family – parents, wives, siblings, and children – will be permitted a visit in order to spend Christmas with their loved one. You will be picked up at 9:00 AM on 24 December at the border at the Arlington checkpoint, and will receive free transportation via military escort to Fort Bragg, where the prisoners are being held. All persons taking part must have valid, verifiable identification, and everyone will be thoroughly searched; no electronic devices or weapons of any kind will be permitted. On the day after Christmas, you will be transported back to the pickup point. Meals and lodging will be provided courtesy of the Government of the Confederate States of America. Please respond if interested by filling out the attached form...

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DAY 1302

CHAPTER 70

Sherrie Hopkins, a native of Port Clinton, Ohio, sat beside her husband, CPO Hollis Hopkins, the man she loved and had been so afraid she'd never see again. Their ten year-old daughter sat on the other side of him, paying much more attention to the father she hadn't seen for months than to the turkey, dressing, and the huge variety of side dishes that had been provided for them. Like her mother, she ate while keeping one hand on her dad, fearing for him, and having no idea when – or *if* – she would ever see him again.

It was tough on Hopkins too; even though he had been anxious to see his family when the Confederate officer told them they were coming, it was hard having them here, because he was certain they would be parted again all too soon, and probably for good. He was under no illusions; despite the exceptionally good treatment of himself and the rest of the SEALs, they had been charged with espionage, and, regardless of the fact that they were acting under orders, there was no question that they were guilty. As angry as the Southerners were, he knew that he and the others had a better than even chance of facing a rope or a firing squad, or at least a long prison sentence...unless the US decided to bail them out with some huge bribe or concession. *When the Devil bought ice skates, maybe!* His captors had allowed him access to the radio and newspapers, and, so far, Washington was still in full-blown damage control mode, so anxious to cover its ass that it wouldn't even publicly admit the prisoners were there in the first place.

Glancing around at the other men, he could see similar worries plainly painted on their faces; worries that suddenly increased when a platoon of fully armed Confederate Marines marched in and formed a line between the diners and the podium he had noticed earlier in front of the room. He relaxed a little when he saw the reporters following them in and setting up their cameras, and then he gasped.

President Franklin Gore entered the mess hall in his dress gray uniform, the overhead lights winking off his medals, his spit-shined shoes, and the worn metal of the ever-present .45 hanging at his side.

They all looked at Frank in wonder as he stepped behind the podium. He brought no notes and no teleprompters; instead, his eyes were fixed on the prisoners and their families, who stared back at him uncertainly.

"You were military personnel following the orders of your superior officers. Yes, you committed espionage in accordance with those orders, which is a capital crime, but thankfully no one was injured, and no Confederate property was destroyed.

"This is also Christmas Day in this Christian country, when we celebrate the birth of the Savior, Redeemer, and Forgiver. It's a magical time, when mercy and forgiveness are the order of the day.

"Therefore, by the power vested in me as Acting President of the Confederate States of America, I will commute what would normally be a sentence of death, and accept your parole. You are men of honor, and we have treated you as such despite your commission of a criminal act, so do the honorable thing. Agree to never bear arms against the Confederate States of America again other than in a legally declared war, and you'll all be free men. I'll release you into the custody of your families, who will stay with you here in base housing tonight, and they can take all of you home with them when they leave tomorrow morning.

"Merry Christmas."

Frank turned to leave, and, even while the families cheered and cried and shouted their unexpected thanks, one of the SEALs called out, "Attention!" and every man got to his feet and saluted. Frank paused, came to attention himself, and returned the gesture before going on his way.

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DAY 1303

CHAPTER 71

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Canadian News Service

In a stunning move today, President Gore of the CSA released all of the eighteen United States Navy SEAL commandos it has held since they were captured as part of a covert operation in an attempt to aid the ill-fated invasion of the Confederacy by Mexico.

The Confederate President called the gesture a "Christmas present for the prisoners' families," who have been petitioning for their release for months now. On his orders, elements of the Confederate Marine Corps transported the men and their families to the border near Arlington in a bus that was part of an armored convoy, and released them to cross into United States territory unhindered. Once on the US side, they were all quickly whisked away, but the press was allowed full access to them while they were still on the Confederate side.

"I don't care what our government says about him," Sherri Hopkins, the wife of one of the prisoners told reporters, "to me, President Gore is a saint! No other country would have treated my husband as well as the Confederates did. He hadn't been harmed in any way beyond being imprisoned, and he's been well fed; he's actually gained weight. The prisoners' families have been treated with more courtesy than I've ever been subjected to, and more than we had any right to expect, considering. And now, our men are coming back home with us. This is the best Christmas ever!"

There is some speculation that the released prisoners may be tried and punished by the American military for accepting parole, which is a direct violation of standing orders; however, legal experts say that would be a difficult case to make, since the parole given to them by President Gore only restricts them from illegal acts. Besides which, US public opinion alone, which is definitely in the camp of the prisoners and their former captors, is expected to be enough to dissuade any such actions...

Swiss Press World-Wide

The Pope and other church leaders, as well as the Red Cross, Red Crescent, and humanitarian activists around the world, have hailed CS President Gore's Christmas release of the American naval commandos it has held for more than six months now. Also lauded was their humane treatment while in captivity.

"We have," said the Holy Father in a Vatican press release, "in these recent actions of President Franklin Gore, an example that every leader of every nation in the world should take note of and emulate."

The release also said that the Confederate President "truly understood the meaning of Christmas."

In related news, the United States Government is still holding the former prisoners and their families incommunicado, and are allowing no press access in order to, according to the White House press secretary, "preserve their privacy..."

Confederate Tattler

Tongues are wagging after Vice President Samuel Wirtz and Miss Victoria Slastyonoff, fiancée of the late President Jonathon Edge, announced their engagement this morning. The Vice President proposed to her in Richmond on Christmas Day, and she said, "Yes."

Their upcoming marriage is tentatively planned for this spring in Richmond, and is expected to be THE social event of the year…

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DAY 1312

CHAPTER 72

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Confederate News Service

It's a good thing that General Gore is President of the Confederacy's Revolutionary Government, because, today, he began just the first three in a series of projects that are nothing less than revolutionary, and will change the Confederacy just as surely, and at least as much, as the War itself.

"*This is not the 19th century, nor is it the 20th,*" *he said in his landmark speech at the capitol in Richmond today, "and, while we cannot and will not forget the lessons learned from those periods, we must also never forget that there are still many more lessons out there yet to be learned. We have to use the past for our foundation, and build on it, while remembering that the foundation is not the house itself. We are not a stagnant country, and we will not become one, not on my watch. Instead, we will begin forging ahead, not only securing our own position, but in securing a future for our children. It's my intention that the Confederate States of America become both the safest and the most well educated country in the world, and Confederate Net will go a long way in accomplishing these goals."*

General Gore went on to describe Confederate Net – a project jointly developed along with First Lady Samantha Gore and Head of the Confederate Intelligence Service, Michael Dayton, as a comprehensive system that would ultimately integrate nearly all of our country's communications, including TV, radio and cyberspace, into a single, immensely powerful system. He then described the projected end result.

"*The basis of Confederate Net is a new Linux-based computer operating system designed expressly for this purpose, compatible with most Windows-based software, and available free, but that is only part of it. It is much, much more than that. Confederate Net will provide free high speed Internet to virtually every Confederate household desiring it, via a layered, integrated system of cable an satellite, with a double backup redundancy. As this will be an integral part of our national infrastructure, we will guard it and protect it for you. We will take care of guarding against viruses and other malware from the source, with highly trained experts on the job, twenty four-seven, as well as free tech support from right here in the South, not some foreign land. Further, everything will be state of the art; not yesterday's technology, or even last hour's, but this very second's technology, upgraded continuously, twenty-four-seven.*

"*We will not infringe on your liberty, nor will we allow others to do so; on that, you have my word. More importantly, you will also have the law. The Confederate Net Operating System has its own fully customizable search engine, and is designed to make harvesting your information and surfing habits difficult or impossible by a third party without your permission, and any and all such illicit information gathering will be illegal within the borders of the Confederacy. Anyone, including government agents, employees, companies, or private citizens, intentionally intercepting domestic communications without a warrant will, if found guilty, serve mandatory jail time. Anyone launching viruses or other malware or hacking attacks on any part of the system will be considered saboteurs of our country's infrastructure, and dealt with accordingly.*

"*Rest assured, we do not intend to practice censorship of ideas; you'll be able to access any site anywhere in the world not containing viruses, Trojans, or other malware, or that does not promote child sex, homosexuality, bestiality, miscegenation, or the sexual use of bodily wastes. If you want that kind of filth and your state allows it, you'll have pay for a private Internet service provider; we're providing a free service, and you're not going to do that on our dime."*

The text of the law, as presented to this network, makes it clear that the individual states can apply any of their own more restrictive filters to Confederate Net as they see fit, or, on the other hand, can allow the intrastate, as opposed to interstate, distribution of otherwise banned material within their bailiwick, but, at least at this point, no one appears to want to come out in favor of what the vast majority of Southerners see as gross sexual perversion. Most people concede that would not be a smart political move, to put it mildly.

"*What do we in the government get out of it? To put it simply, the same thing you get out of it; safety*

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and utility. This system will give us the ability to defend the Confederacy from any and all cyber-attacks. All computers connected to Confederate Net will be linked together in sectors, and will be able to use idle processing power in other linked machines as needed, meaning faster speeds and more efficient use for everyone. More importantly, in time of emergency, such as war or natural disaster, the Confederacy can draw unused processing power from every computer sector in the net, giving us the single largest super computer in the world, by orders of magnitude. Just think about that; by the act of signing onto Confederate Net, you are actively helping to defend our country, our way of life, and our people. Think of it as your computer being part of a militia, just as are the able bodied men in every state; it's your chance to give back, and do so in such a way you won't even feel the pinch. That's an opportunity that doesn't come along very often."

President Gore went on to explain that both the public and commercial television and radio stations throughout the Confederacy, as well as those belonging to our friends and allies abroad, will be able to take advantage of the system as well, to be made available free on demand to Confederate Net subscribers, to watch and listen to via their computers, car radios, cellular phones and other mobile devices, and home televisions.

"*We will have the broadest selection of quality programming – and I stress the world 'quality' – of any country in the world. Not only will you have the opportunity to be entertained, but to be educated as well, and to continue that education throughout your life, if you so desire. We will make the opportunity available to you, and your only limits will be your own talents and determination."*

The President also added that, via the Confederate Net, the CSA would have the largest lending library in the world, a pet project of the First Lady. He outlined plans to digitize practically every book ever written, and make it available for two-week loans, downloadable into any computer or e-reader in a self-deleting, copy-proof digital format. He stressed that the authors would be compensated for the original copy, just as they would in a conventional library. This, he said, would make the days of out-of-print books a thing of the past.

"*There will never be an Orwellian 'memory hole' in the Confederacy," he declared.*

He also asked teachers and experts to volunteer in the government studios to produce video lessons on every subject that would then be made available free on demand anywhere in the Confederacy, along with the required e-books, via Confederate Net.

"*It is my sincere hope that the state and local school systems, as well as private and homeschoolers, will choose to take advantage of the opportunity presented by the Confederate Net. A substantial amount of money can be saved in books and lessons, which I'm sure you could put to use elsewhere."*

Of course, in keeping within the principles of our system of government, the law also specifically forbids the Central Government from ever interfering directly in state or local school systems in any way, shape, or form, including mandating any curriculum, including this one. The material on Confederate Net will only be an option, one that they may or may not wish to use. As part of the system, however, the educational branch will offer proctored testing at all Confederate General Government Offices in every state that will lead to college credits and even diplomas for those passing, based on demonstrated academic ability rather than credit hours, making Confederate Net essentially a free, fully accredited university, open to all.

President Gore then dropped a second bombshell, one as big as Confederate Net in its own way. He has instituted a complete overhaul of the Confederate banking system that turns everything on its head.

To begin with, the Bank of the Confederacy will become an international holding institution. For a fee, anyone from any country in the world may deposit their funds here, and have them guaranteed as absolutely secure. Written into law, the system will neither disclose nor release funds and account information to anyone, be they individual or governmental body, other than the depositor himself, unless the depositor is the subject of legal or civil action by the Confederacy, or the depositor's country is at war with the Confederacy or its allies. Anything else involving foreign powers is to be considered none of our business, and the law prohibits related suits by elements within the Confederacy on behalf of any foreign government or interest in an attempt to get around the BOC privacy rules.

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"It's a doubly useful program," President Gore pointed out, "Its deposit fees make money for the Confederacy – money that our states, businesses, and citizens will not have to pay – and, at the same time, it keeps the peace. After all, it is primarily the wealthy who will be taking advantage of this, and, like it or not, wealth brings influence. Since their deposits will be at direct risk should their country go to war with ours, I strongly suspect that influence will be vigorously directed towards reaching a peaceful resolution to whatever conflict has arisen."

An anonymous source within the government pointed out, the sudden withdrawal of funds from a particular country's investors could well be a valuable indicator of a potential problem on the way.

The bank would have applications on the domestic front as well, not only in savings, but in providing home and real estate loans to individuals and businesses...with no interest!

"The system is essentially the same one used in ancient Europe. Here's how it will work," President Gore said, "Anyone wanting a loan will pay 20% down; 10% of the amount is a transaction service fee, and the other 10% goes towards the price. Following that, the borrower continues making payments on the price of the property until it is paid off, with no interest or additional fees.

"Here is the best part. Say a borrower has paid back 20% of the property's value, and then is unable to repay the rest for whatever reason. Under the current system, that 20% is money lost; not anymore. When the government sells the foreclosed property, the borrower gets 20% – or whatever percentage he has invested in it – of the sale price back, not counting the initial fee. Presumably, a borrower has need of money if he defaults, and this way, he is not left flat broke when he needs it most. Under this new system, this will not be a loan, but an investment. If property values rise, he might actually make a profit out of the early sale, well over and above his initial investment."

All this reporter has to say is, when can I sign up?

Part of the bill also strictly limits the interest rates and regulates the business practices of existing interstate and international banks and credit card companies doing business in the CSA. The President bluntly stated that the bankers – "banksters" as he referred to them, adding that they had often been "nothing more than gangsters, legal loan sharks – will not have free reign to rob the Southern people blind as they did in the US, and that the Central Government will never, under any circumstances, use tax dollars to bail them out if they get in trouble.

"If you're big enough to do business interstate or internationally, you're big enough to do it right and take the risks involved. Don't come running to the Confederate taxpayers to pay for your screw-ups and give you money so you can pay yourself a big, juicy bonus! That's not going to fly here in Dixie!"

He also urged the citizenry never to allow their lives to be credit-based again. "You have to do your part, and live within your means as much as possible. Save your money, and when you get enough, buy what you need."

As a final plank in his state of the Confederacy speech today, President Gore announced an environmental and energy summit beginning at nine o'clock tomorrow morning, much to many people's shock and dismay...

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DAY 1313

CHAPTER 73

Frank looked out at the assembly before him. Industry leaders, agricultural concerns, fisheries officials, and sportsmen's groups sat uncomfortably shoulder-to-shoulder with equally uneasy representatives of various environmental organizations, most of them shocked and craning their necks to see who all was there. They had received an invitation by phone only at nine o'clock the evening before, telling them if they wanted any input in forming the Confederacy's new environmental policies, they'd better be there in Memphis at nine the next morning, because no one would be admitted once the meeting started. Obviously this had caused some frantic scrambling, throwing everyone off balance on all sides as well as causing some major sleep deprivation amongst the participants, which was precisely why the President did it that way. As for Frank, he had a hot toddy, made love to Samantha, closed his eyes before eleven, and had gotten better than eight hours sleep, which gave him the edge he wanted. Now, he was well-rested, all bright-eyed and bushy-tailed, while the ones he was dealing with looked as if they needed intravenous caffeine drips just to keep them awake.

Just as importantly, they were frightened of him. After all, he had turned the energy companies – oil, gas and electricity – into public utilities, still under most of the same management, but under government control, with policies, prices, profit margins, and bonuses strictly regulated. Even though more energy was being produced than ever, more people were working, and prices were rapidly dropping, it scared them. Suddenly stockholders were making steady profits rather than massive windfalls on the backs of the people, and they were left with no choice but to take it and like it. Further, he had outlawed price-gouging of any already-existing commodity by any interstate company during emergencies, and most of the governors had followed his lead, instituting the same thing on a state level. Suddenly, the government of the people, not big business, was king. With a stroke of his pen, he had changed the way things were done. It was a demonstration of power and a willingness to use it, and it got people's attention.

It wasn't just business, of course; numerous individual environmental terrorists were already sitting in prison, and several organizations who had openly backed their actions found their assets confiscated and their leaders on trial. In one case, a notable organization's famous ship was seized and its captain and crew charged with piracy after they intentionally collided with and damaged a Confederate fishing trawler and cut its nets in the Sea of Cortez. Both sides knew Frank was not a man to mess with.

Satisfied, he began his speech.

"Today is the start of a new world, ladies and gentlemen, and a clean slate. Never before in history has a country done what we are about to do. We are going to build a sane environmental policy here, and we're going to do it with science and common sense, with both of those things coming before propaganda, emotion, hysterics, or profit. That's the way it's going to be; if you can't do that, then get out; you'll have no part in the process."

The meeting lasted a week, running well in excess of sixteen to eighteen hours a day. Some said later that President Gore simply wore them down.

It caused some consternation when Frank informed them he didn't know which scientists to believe on the subject of global warming, but it didn't matter anyway.

"Yes, we are facing climate change; there's no question about that. Whether it's man's activities or simply a natural cyclic process is up for debate, but it won't be debated here because there is no need for it. It's simply a matter of common sense that you keep your world as clean as possible, whether it's reducing emissions or picking up garbage along the road. It's also common sense, both in terms of the environment and national security, to begin reducing our dependence on fossil fuels, of which there is a finite supply.

"What we are going to do is build a sustainable country; that includes a sustainable economy, sustainable

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energy, sustainable wilderness areas, sustainable agriculture, fisheries, logging, and industry. Everything is going to be a compromise, but it *will* be a compromise that works to the maximum benefit of the Confederacy and its people, that neither unnecessarily pollutes our land nor causes massive economic hardships."

After a power company lawyer and a pair of environmental activists were summarily ejected for obstructionism, the others saw their President meant business and got down to it. What came out of it was, according a high-ranking Swiss Embassy staffer who was allowed to sit in as one of the guest international observers, the most amazing environmental plan of all time.

Representatives of each group taking part would be placed as a permanent advisory council to both the central and state governments. While they would have no regulatory powers, as trained professionals, they would make the recommendations for changes to those respective governments, and those statements, by law, would always be made public in their original form for all the citizens of Dixie to see and make their own decisions about. They would also be available to advise individuals and businesses about environmental issues on their own properties.

If the environmentalists wanted their voices heard, they would eschew any and all violence against and interference with lawful activities, or the funding and support of those who did so. They would also formally recognize the right of citizens to eat meat and hunt and fish for non-threatened species in accordance with the law. The more radical groups walked out at that, but the larger, more sincere organizations, seeing the greater good of finally having a voice, not only over the original states but the new, formerly Mexican territories, stayed on.

The expensive fights between commercial and recreational fishermen would stop and stop now. Representatives of their groups, along with environmental and watershed industrial organizations, would work together...and they did. Before the conference was over, an agreement was already being hammered out to adopt a version of the model Icelandic fishing regulatory system, with catch limits with transferable quotas, and the required landing of all by-catch, as well as a ban on shark finning.

Frank saw it needed to be done, and he did it, much to the amazement of everyone. He issued an order that every oil and gas well was to be put in service and pumping immediately, and at the same time, ordered that new methods of energy use be developed. No choice, no excuse, just damned well do it, and any public utility company dragging their feet would immediately be nationalized and sold at auction to someone who would, just as those who had conspired with the late LC Tarbox had been, seized, broken up, and sold. Every Central Government agency was to begin converting their vehicles to be capable of using alternative resources: hydrogen, methane, electric, and bio-diesel, and states were requested to do the same, as well as to mandate that their cities allow the use of electric golf carts on their slower-traffic streets. Rivers not overly environmentally sensitive were to be dammed and every dam became a hydroelectric power plant, while at the same time, the environmental and fishermen's groups were to work together to develop diverters and other methods to reduce the impact on fish populations. Wind and solar power units were to become the preferred power source whenever practical.

Dixie Historical Review

People complained – often loudly – but by the time of the election, the Confederacy was over 96% energy self-sufficient, and it was set to become an energy exporter within the next year. Of the ones that the process had initially upset, few of them were willing to try to go back to the old ways of doing things even now that they had the chance. As a bonus, the air and water were noticeably cleaner.

In fact, everything was cleaner; some people actually joked about cleanliness becoming Dixie's new national vice. Confederate Public Television and Radio hammered the point home constantly, and the people, with their newly rediscovered pride in their identity, became caught up in a new, Southern fried version of environmentalism, under the banner of Southern pride.

"*We are stewards of the Earth for God Almighty," Reverend Jase proclaimed in one of his most famous sermons, "and we need to hang our heads in shame for the poor job we've been doing for Him!"*

No one gave up hunting and fishing – on the contrary, now more people did it than ever – but then

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again, they had more land fit to hunt and water you could eat the fish out of.

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DAY 1342

CHAPTER 74

Frank looked out at the cameras in front of the Presidential sound stage in the Capitol, but he didn't see them. The glaring lights and black eyes of the lenses faded away, and, as always, what he could see in his mind's eye were the millions of people in the Confederacy who were glued to their TV screens, hanging on his every word. He made sure he always saw that, pictured it firmly in his head, so he wouldn't become the type of politician he despised, basking solely in their own reflections in the lenses. He never wanted to forget that Frank Gore was not the one he was working for, especially when he had something difficult to lay out before the Southern people. With the preliminary niceties out of the way, he got down to the heart of the matter.

"You all know that, like most of you, I'm an isolationist at heart, and that I never wanted to be involved in foreign affairs. Unfortunately, we've been slapped in the face with the cold, hard reality that, just because we're not interested in the rest of the world, it doesn't follow that the rest of the world is uninterested in us. Recent events have given us no choice but to assume our place upon the broader world stage.

"The Confederacy has enemies in Eastern Europe, Western Asia, and the Middle East; both Islamic and Zionist powers have attacked us more than once, and would like to see us fall. More importantly, we have powerful enemies on two borders: the United States to the North, and Mexico to the Southwest, both of whom we have fought wars with in the all-too-recent past, as I need not remind those of us who suffered through them, those who fought and bled, and those who lost people we loved.

"We are under embargoes, by the cowards in the White-hating leftist governments of the European Union, who claim to represent the interests of our defeated enemies in Mexico, but in reality want to prevent us from reaching our full potential, in order that we never have a chance to become their economic rival. If you recall, that's much what the First Revolution of 1776 was fought over; we found a far-off country in Europe telling us what to do unacceptable then, and I'll be damned it's acceptable now, after we've paid for this land with our sweat and our blood. We didn't fight and die just so our children could starve in a third world society like some jungle native.

"We also cannot ever forget that we have the single most powerful country in the world at this time, the People's Republic of China, literally on our southwestern border, in Chiapas. We have a good working relationship with them now, but the best way to keep that relationship is to keep ourselves strong enough so that it's more profitable to trade with us, and to invest in us, rather than to try to take us.

"Unfortunately, faced with all these powers, we are not strong enough to insure our own security yet, and even if we were, we cannot forget the nations who gave their assistance in our struggle for freedom, who fought by our side and shed their blood with us during the past two wars, and who are in much the same boat that we are. And because of all of these considerations, something needed to be done, and I have done it.

"As of six-o'clock Eastern Standard Time, thanks primarily to the indefatigable efforts of Louisiana Congressman and acting Secretary of State TJ Ashby, who has barely been home since the Mexican War began, the Confederate States of America became part of the Pacific Economic and Defense Alliance. Congressman Ashby, at my behest, has signed the treaty, and not only with our friends, Japan and the Russian Federation. Following months of secret negotiations, Canada has come on board as well as the North Star Republic. For those unfamiliar with the latter, you used to know it as Alaska. The governor of that State was a covert member of their independence movement, and, as of the time the treaty was signed, he declared independence and ordered the seizure of all US bases in their territory by the North Star Defense Forces, formerly the Alaskan National Guard. At his invitation, troops from Canada, Japan, Russia, and the Confederacy have all landed and set up a temporary multi-national peace-keeping force to insure that they may be secure in their liberty, just as we are. There is nothing the United States can do now, because North Star's independence is already *fait accompli*, and they, or anyone else for that matter, lack the ability to take us all

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on.

"By now, I know many of you are scratching your heads or swearing at me and asking, 'what's in it for us?' Well, besides security, we are going to have some great economic benefits coming our way.

"Russia has vast reserves of oil, as does Canada in its oil sands, and Alaska, who probably has the most of all, and then us, right here in the Confederacy; in the latter two cases, oil we were never allowed to tap before, either because of US Government or corporate interference. We also have great reserves of coal, much of which we were forbidden to mine, that can readily be converted to oil and natural gas. Between all of us in the Pacific Alliance, we have far more oil than the entire Middle East put together, and Japan has the investment wealth and high technology industry and infrastructure to assist us all in getting it out more efficiently. We will be bigger than OPEC. We will no longer be buying imported oil, and subject to the whims of others; instead *they* will be buying *our* oil!

"Rest assured we have no intention of abandoning our commitment to a clean environment; on the contrary. Not only will all mining and drilling be done to the most up-to-date environmental friendly specifications, but part of the revenues of these oil sales will be financing our switch over to clean, renewable, long-term energy sources. As efficient as fossil fuels are, their supply is finite, and the smart thing to do is to prepare, in order that, when they finally run out, we will no longer need them.

"In closing, I would like to assure everyone that I have taken this step because it was necessary for Dixie's future, and for the benefit of our children, and those children yet to come. Because of the actions taken tonight, our future and theirs will be a safer and more prosperous one. On that, you have my word of honor.

"Thank you all for standing by me. Good night."

President Roberts looked up at his Chief of Staff, Herman Foxman.

"It's a done deal, isn't it?"

Foxman sighed. "I'm afraid it is, sir."

He already knew the answer, but he had to ask.

"And there's nothing we can do?"

"No sir. If we try to take back Alaska, the Alliance will crush us within a month at the outside; we won't even have what's left of the United States anymore."

"What's left of it?" Roberts chortled without humor. "What is left of it, Herman? Just tell me, what the hell is left?"

"Well, we still have the Midwest bread basket, the West Coast, and the Industrial Belt…"

"And what's going to run the Industrial Belt? Where are we going to get our fuel now?"

Foxman swallowed hard before admitting, "The Alliance has already contacted us. They're willing to sell us oil and coal at whatever price they and their partners agree upon – and they assure us it will be competitive with OPEC, which is boycotting us anyway – and will keep the electricity flowing from their plants and hydro units, as long as we don't cause any problems."

"Who the hell could we cause problems to now? We've got nothing left!"

"Sir, we still have armed forces to be reckoned with..."

"Armed forces half their original size after the Southerners left, and like the rest of our country, filled up with spics and niggers!"

"Mr. President!" Foxman said in shock, "Surely there's no need ..."

"No need to what? No need to be politically incorrect? Don't you see what's happened here? We are now a country with a White minority! Those assholes to the South filled us up with all their damned Blacks, Mexicans and third worlders! We've got more people on the dole than are paying taxes! We're paying out more than we're taking in, and our crime rate is off the freaking scale! They've killed us, Herman; they have freaking killed us!"

"But race is just a social construct – "

"Bullshit! Save that crap for the electorate, because you don't believe it anymore than I do! A country is a reflection of its people, and the reflection this one is giving off now has third world written all over it! We are righteously and truly screwed!"

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Foxman, clearly uncomfortable with the direction the conversation had taken, changed course a little.

"There are three more conditions on us getting the oil, coal and power."

Roberts rubbed both hands down his face, stretching the skin in frustration.

"What else do they want? My head and both balls on a plate?"

"No sir; first, they insist that NATO fully withdraw from Kosovo, as well as from the rest of the Balkans and Eastern Europe."

"That will be the Russians, securing their own sphere of influence. They'll give the Serbs license to take back Kosovo, and it won't be pretty."

Foxman nodded and said, "It's the same with the second demand; they insist on the expulsion of all Chechen rebel leaders from NATO countries."

"We can do both; hell, it's costing us money we can't afford anyway. Still, they need to realize I can't control the rest of NATO. Not anymore, anyway..."

"I believe the Russians will do that; after all, Canada is *their* ally now, and Russia holds the gas valve to the European members. If they want to remain developed countries, they'll have to knuckle under to these demands."

Roberts took a deep breath.

"Thirdly, they demand that the US abandon Guantanamo Naval Base."

The President laughed. There was no humor in it at all, but the only other option was to break down and cry when he saw missing pieces of the puzzle clicking together.

"Well, now I guess we know part of the deal the Confederates made with the Cubans to keep them out of the war; they'd pressure us to leave Gitmo."

"Do you think they planned this whole thing that far back?"

"I have no doubt of it; this is that damned Gore, right up and down. Oh, I doubt they gave any specifics to the Cubans, but...*damn it!"* He came to a sudden realization. "Cuba's going to lease the base to them, aren't they?"

Foxman nodded.

"I just spoke with Admiral Sanchez a few minutes ago, and he...um...seems to think that's likely. The Confederacy would probably insist on it in return for making the demand; after all it would – "

"– give them full control of the entire Gulf of Mexico, bolstering their strategic advantage. Unlike us, they're buddies with the Cubans too, so the base won't be a source of irritation, but a big source of cash for the surrounding area. Oh yeah, I see it now, all too clearly."

"What will you do, Mr. President?"

"What else can I do? We're having riots somewhere every day now; can you imagine what will happen if this alliance of theirs cuts off our oil and coal supply, and stops sending power into the grid across our borders?" He shook his head in defeat. "We'll have to give it to them, otherwise, they'll put us in the dark, the cities will explode, and we'll be so weakened that either they or the Chinese will waltz right in and take it in less than six months. Put the best face on it we can; tell the public we're voluntarily downsizing in order to put more money into the domestic problems we're up to our asses in." Not looking up, he added, "We might as well get used to it, because it's not going to be the last thing we lose."

"Wh-what do you mean?"

"Do you really think Alaska is the only state to talk to the Confederates, or to the Canadians, for that matter? Every state that borders either one of them is making a comparison between life staying with us and going to the other side, or simply declaring full independence like Alaska did."

"They wouldn't dare!"

"They damn well would dare, and they're damned well daring even as we speak – I know they are! I just don't know which one will be first, but when it happens, the rest will fall like dominoes, and there won't be one damned thing we can do to stop it."

Shaking his head ruefully, he added, "Plants was afraid of presiding over the loss of 'Lincoln's Union.' He was wrong; it looks like I'll be the lucky one presiding over that, and in a bigger way than he could ever have imagined."

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CSA Times, Editorial Commentary

I don't know what to say to all this; my head is still spinning. In one night, as far as those of us out of the loop are concerned, we went from isolationist to part of the most powerful alliance in the world, bar none. We also went from, considering the damages of two wars, a barely-developed country to an international economic powerhouse.

I want to complain – I really do! – because this goes directly against the non-interventionist principles laid down by President Washington during the First Revolution, about avoiding foreign entanglements, and yet, there is no denying what President Gore said, that those foreign interests are not avoiding us, particularly when we have two hostile and one potentially hostile interest on our very borders. There is also no denying that we need the investment and money that this change will bring in. Equally, I'm ashamed to say, I can't deny that finally crushing the power of the United States, who fought one recent war against us and actively instigated and backed a second, that has taken the lives of so many of our people, has a certain sense of justice to it that I thoroughly enjoyed.

I just…don't know. This changes so much, changes so many expectations we all had for how things were going to be, that it's a little scary, I guess. One thing about it; it's a whole new world out there now, a brave new world, where anything is possible.

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DAY 1360

CHAPTER 75

Victoria awoke gradually and stretched, feeling the smoothness of the satin sheets against her naked skin, and smiled with contentment as the first glow of morning light through the patio doors pressed gently against her closed eyes. Her lips stretched in a sleepy smile as she remembered the day and the night before, of a white wedding gown and glittering lights, of laughing friends and sparkling champagne, of the honeymoon flight, of kisses and cries of pleasure in the dark.

It was like a dream!

In fact, it was so much like a dream that she stretched a hand out to touch Sam, to reassure herself that it had really happened, and then her brow furrowed and her smile diminished a little when her hand found only more satin, albeit still warm from his presence. Forcing her eyes open, she rose on one elbow to see her new husband's figure standing on the balcony, leaning on the railing and looking out at the lightening sky that told of the sun just below the ocean's horizon. He had put on a pair of lounge pants but was shirtless, showing his compact, powerful, battle-scarred torso as he leaned on his elbows, motionless except for the tropical morning wind blowing his salt and pepper hair.

Her smile returned as she watched him; then she stirred, rose and wrapped the sheet around her before going to stand by his side. He heard her coming and straightened up; then, then spread his right arm to accommodate her. She happily snuggled against him, after bending her neck to kiss the scar on his shoulder, the one he'd got saving her life in battle.

"Good morning." He returned the favor, and punctuated the sentence by kissing her gently before turning his gaze back to the sea.

"Good morning to you. What is it you all say? A penny for your thoughts?"

"I'm thinking it's a new day." Gesturing at the sunrise with a twitch of his chin, he said, "Most people think the day dies with the sunset, but it doesn't; the old one only passes away in the morning when the new one takes its place." He shook his head slightly as if to mock his own burst of philosophy, but his self-deprecating smile couldn't hide the happy glimmer in the corner of his eye, and couldn't stop the next words that came out. "It's a new day for the world, for the Confederacy…and it's a new day for me. A whole new day..."

"It's a new day for me, too," she told him truthfully.

Even as she spoke, the rim of the morning sun appeared, and they watched it rise together, both agreeing it was the most beautiful thing they'd ever seen.

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DAY 1374

CHAPTER 76

"Hi Billy."

Billy looked up from his desk to see Victoria standing there in his office door. Despite the success of his company and now being as rich as the Gores, he had refused to leave them. "We started this damn thing together in Columbia, and I'm goin' to see it through with you until the end, until you leave office," he had declared when Frank had mistakenly assumed he'd be leaving. The President reassured him that, as long as the big man wanted to stay on as his personal assistant, he was more than happy to have him, so he remained ensconced in the Presidential outer office at the temporary capital. Smiling, he got to his feet and spread his big arms.

"Hey, Vika! You're back from your honeymoon already! Come on in."

His broad smile was infectious, and she caught it and returned it as she stepped inside and hugged him.

"So," he asked, once he let her go, "how's married life treatin' you? You makin' Sam behave himself?"

Nodding, she told him, "It's great, better than I ever expected. He's so...so simple."

"Yeah, I always thought that myself," he teased, grinning and swirling a finger meaningfully around his temple, and she laughed.

"Not in the head, silly! I mean I never have any doubt where he stands, or that, whatever that stand is, it's a firm one. Maybe simple isn't the right word, because he can *definitely* be subtle too. Perhaps I should say honest, or solid maybe."

"He is that," Billy assured her in all seriousness. "So, would you like to sit down?"

Shaking her head, Victoria told him, "Actually, I wanted to ask you for a really big favor. The techs have been working on the network in our building while we were gone, setting up the Confederate Net, and I can't get into my computer. When I called, they said they'd get down there as soon as they could, but evidently a lot of other people were knocked off too, so I'll have to wait my turn. Could I possibly borrow yours for a few minutes sometime today? I'd like to catch up on my email."

"Sure!" he said, making a broad gesture at his desk with his left hand while taking her gently by the arm with his right to escort her forward. "Help yourself."

"I can wait until you're through with whatever you're doing..."

"I'm not doin' anything important, really. We're opening up two more factories, one in Texas and another in Serbia to tap into the European market, and I'm just givin' my okay to all the crap my business manager suggests. I may own the company, but I'm just a 'yes man.' Since I don't know anything about business and he does, and he works on a percentage, he figures it out, I say 'yes,' and we both make money." He laughed. "I can say 'yes' just as easy in an hour or two as I can right now. Besides, if I don't make him wait for it once in a while, he'll take me for granted."

Victoria knew that was bluff; Billy might not have been well-educated or even overly smart in the conventional sense, but he was wise, and had an abundance of what the Southerners called 'common sense.' She knew him well enough to know he was never say, 'yes' to anything until he was sure about it, and nobody who ever met the boisterous giant would ever take anything about him for granted. He was simply giving place to her because he liked her, and she found it touching.

"Bend down here, Billy, and give me your cheek."

Dutifully he obeyed, and she kissed him on the right side, just above the beard line, making him smile broadly.

"There. Thank you."

He laughed again. "Maybe I should thank you! You just made my day." Turning to go, he said over his shoulder, "I'm going to go work out and grab lunch with Frank and Sammie, so I'll be gone an hour or two.

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Take as long as you want."

She watched him go, and, as she sat down at his desk, she couldn't help but worry about him.

"He's so nice," she said to the empty room, "even if he is big and goofy. I suppose most women can't see past that, unless they're chasing his wallet."

Billy dated – quite often, in fact, as Victoria knew because she kept up with the gossip. Besides, as heroes of the Revolution, they were celebrities, and anything any of them did made the tabloids that were wildly popular amongst Southern housewives, but, so far anyway, the man some called 'the most eligible bachelor in the Confederacy' had yet to find anyone to get serious about. He had outgrown the easy barflies and biker chicks he used to run with, and now most of those who pursued him were far, far worse in Victoria's book: shameless gold diggers and social climbers, wanting what he could give them, but not wanting *him*. She was thankful that it usually only took him one or two dates before he figured that out, but she knew that couldn't last forever. He was a big man with a big heart, and right now, that big heart had to be lonely, and he would eventually fill it, one way or another. She wondered what kind of woman he was looking for; then, as she closed the window on his computer and saw a closeup of a pretty girl's face set as his desktop background image, she knew, and it shocked her to the very core.

As the young people here say, 'no way!'

Studying the image for a few moments, Vika got curious.

I wonder what you're all about, Big Man?

She knew that now was her chance to find out, so instead of checking her email, she brought up his favorites and his browsing history.

Looking at it, Vika scrolled down through various blogs, news, motorcycle, and automotive websites, and then frowned when she saw a familiar web address, for a Russian "artistic nude" site – soft-core porn, really, with no real sexual acts depicted, but a lot of naked women – one of many such web businesses headquartered in her home country. It was admittedly one of the classier operations, but still, it was what it was. It was also a site that had caused more than a few problems for her own family.

No doubt, Billy's only being a man, but still...

Her frown grew until her normally smooth brow furrowed. Most of the items from that site's history showed a single commonality. Clicking from one to another, she spot-checked them, and quickly confirmed her suspicions; the same slightly curly red hair, milk-pale skin and sky blue eyes that graced his background image...they were all pages of the same model.

On a hunch, she clicked *My Pictures* and began rummaging around until she found the file she wanted, the one marked *Private*. Once she saw what was in it, she sat back, stunned.

But only for a moment; in the next minute, the corners of her mouth tweaked, and the beginnings of a broad smile spread its way across her face like sunrise on the horizon, along with the gestation of a plan that began forming in her mind.

Sometimes, God does work in mysterious ways!

"Did you find what you were looking for, Vika?"

The smiling Russian nodded at the Billy as he re-entered his office, his hair still damp from his post-workout shower.

"Yes, I did, plus a little bit more. What is it you like so much about Natalia?"

Billy's eyes widened like those of a deer in the headlights of a highballing semi.

"I-I..." he stammered, "...uh, who's Natalia?"

"Never try to lie, Billy. You're not suited for it; your face is too honest. By the way, you really should remember to log out of your office computer before you let someone else use it; it's a security risk, and we women are naturally snoopy. No offense, like you say here in Dixie, but we just can't help ourselves."

"Uh..." He was squirming and blushing bright red, and couldn't think of what the hell to say. It wasn't that he had done anything wrong, or illegal, or even unusual, really, but it was still embarrassing as hell to be caught at it. Seeing his expression and enjoying every minute of it, Vika continued to press him.

"No 'uh.' You have viewed every image of this one Russian model on that site, and you have a hundred or

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more pictures of her in your files. Why is that?"

"Well," he said, squirming, "you know..."

"No, I don't know; I don't know at all. You have almost built a sort of shrine to this girl; what's the attraction? I'm familiar with the place you got it from, and there are dozens and dozens of models on that website, many of them much prettier than she is."

Billy was too wrapped up in his own problems at the moment to wonder why Victoria would be familiar with a porn site.

"Not to me," he said firmly, regaining control of himself. "There's just somethin'...facinatin' about her. I just..." He gave up and shrugged his huge shoulders. "So I'm a fan, okay? What's the big deal?"

She smiled at him, sweetly and mischievously. "No big deal; like I said, we women are just snoopy." Her voice turned more serious. "Let me ask you something; what would you do with a girl like that if you had her?"

Billy could think of several very obvious things right offhand, but he wasn't about to say those in front of a lady, and, considering how he felt about this model he had never met, he really didn't think those would be at the very top of his list anyway, so he settled with, "What do you mean?"

"I mean, what would you do with her? Sleep with her? After all, she takes her clothes off for strange men to look at; she's no better than a whore."

"Bullshit!" He roared, and there so much heat in his tone as he suddenly stepped closer, that, if Vika hadn't known him as well as she did, she would have been frightened. "I've read her bio; she's just some poor girl trying to become somebody, wanting to be rich and famous, and I sure as hell can't fault her for that! Mike's first girlfriend, Kerrie O'Brien, had actually been a whore, and she turned out to be one of the sweetest, most loyal people I've ever met! She laid down her own life for Samantha, and it don't get no more loyal than that! I look at this girl's picture, an' I see the same thing in her eyes I saw in Kerrie's!" His already loud voice continued growing louder by the word, and was booming out like rolling thunder. "I'll tell you somethin' else too, little Miss High and Mighty; maybe you've never done anything you've been ashamed of, but every one of us who've gone through these damned wars have done things we knew were wrong, but we did 'em anyway because they had to be done! I ain't about to fault somebody else for doin' what they have to do either!" He pointed a thick finger at the end of her nose. "I'd be proud just to be seen with any woman that pretty with that look in her eyes, and I wouldn't give a damn about what she did for a living!"

With that, he turned and stormed out of his own office in a huff, but behind him, Vika was smiling broadly. She understood the idea of love at first sight very well; after all, she had fallen in love with Jonathon Edge that very same way, through a picture, before she had ever met him. From Billy's reaction, she had just found out what she wanted to know, and maybe the answer to a problem that had been vexing her own family for a while.

All I need is a little help...What's that old song? I get by with a little help from my friends...

She was grinning openly when she sat back down at Billy's desk once more; she had some calls to make.

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DAY 1384

CHAPTER 77

Billy had known something was going on for a while now, but nobody would tell him what it was, and it was getting really irritating; in fact, he was starting to get a little pissed off at everyone concerned. Frank, Samantha, and Sam all insisted that he was about to meet the most important client he had ever had, and needed to get his act together. The thing was, they wouldn't say just who this client was, other than it was vital that Billy impress them, and that his future might well depend on it. Then they had turned the past week and a half into sheer hell, as far as the big biker was concerned. Frank had volunteered – *He'd insisted!* – on becoming his personal trainer once more, and had knocked another ten pounds off him in as many days, as well as tightening up his already rock-hard muscles. Sammie had taken over between times, and it was his turn in her 'finishing school,' brushing up his admittedly still somewhat course manners, and then she'd sent him to the dentist to have his teeth worked on: porcelain veneers for the front and a partial for the missing ones. She knew the big man hated dentists, so, much to his embarrassment, she had actually gone with him to make sure he actually showed up. Even Colonel Danny Drucci, the Irregulars' 'fashionista,' had been recruited into the mix, and had personally picked out Billy's new suit, and then had it tailored to fit before sending him to the most noted stylist in Richmond for a haircut and beard trim. Sam kept encouraging him to cooperate with the secretive program at every opportunity, and that worried him a little, since he knew his friend had a definitely pointed sense of humor. When the former pig farmer finally called to tell him that this contact was finally in the Vice President's office waiting for him, a certain something in his voice put the big man on his guard.

Whoever this guy is, he must be important as hell! This had better be worth it!

Besides, whoever he was, since he was in Sam's office, Victoria would almost certainly be there. Although Billy would be polite to her for Sam's sake, he was still more than a little angry with her over her remarks a week and a half earlier. He knew it was stupid to hold a grudge over her slam to a woman neither of them even knew, but he couldn't help it. If it was childish, then so be it; he could live with that.

He opened the office door, and there were Sam and Victoria standing, waiting for him, goofy grins plastered on both their faces that put him on full alert.

"Hey, big boy!" Sam said loudly, coming forward, shaking his hand and slapping his shoulder. "How you been?"

"Fine," he answered warily. "How about yourself?"

"Good, good!"

Billy turned and nodded with a forced smile at Sam's wife, but despite his best efforts, his tone was still chilly and aloof.

"Hi, Victoria."

"Billy!" she chided him loudly at his formality of using her full name rather than the shortened 'Vika.' To demonstrate her feigned displeasure, she lightly shoved him on his huge bicep, her own mischievous smile never leaving her face. "Are you still angry with me over what I said about that silly girl the other day?"

"I don't know that she's silly at all," he told her, "but no, I'm not angry."

She laughed and shook her head.

"Like I said before, do not try to lie; you're not any good at it. Anyway, just to show you there are no hard feelings on my part, I would like you to meet someone." She nodded at a third person sitting in the corner of the room in a chair tucked away behind a big potted plant, someone Billy hadn't noticed when he came in. He took in that familiar petite body, long, curly red hair, milky white skin sprinkled with freckles, delicate features, and those eyes – those same wide, beautiful but vulnerable blue eyes he had enshrined on hundreds of pictures on his computer – and rocked back on his heels like someone had hit him right between the eyes with a sledgehammer. His mouth hung open stupidly, and for one of the few times in his life, he was in a full-

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blown panic.

Oh...my...God!

While Sam howled with laughter at his friend's expression, Victoria said, "Billy Sprouse, I'd like you to meet my *niece*, Natalia Slastyonoff." She giggled. "As they say, it's a small world."

While Billy gaped, Natalia rose to her feet and hesitantly stepped forward, looking as tiny and delicate and perfect as a porcelain doll. She blushed, and whispered in broken English with her eyes lowered, "Hello, Mr. Sprouse."

Aunt Vika told me he was big, but my God! He's a giant!

Billy was six and a half feet tall, while the petite Russian girl was almost a foot and a half shorter, only reaching his massive chest and weighing about a third as much as he did. Intimidated by his sheer size, she timidly extended her hand. The big Southerner didn't know much about Russian customs and, being an incurable romantic anyway, despite his rough exterior, went with his instincts. Gently taking her fine-boned hand in his massive paw, instead of shaking it, he lowered his head and pressed his lips to the back of it. Victoria noted that he seemed in no hurry to release it once he straightened back up.

"Please, call me Billy. It's truly a pleasure and an honor to meet you, Miss Slastyonoff; may I call you Natalia?"

"Please do," she said with a widening smile that made those blue eyes twinkle.

"Well?" a sleepy-eyed Victoria asked her niece in Russian after Billy brought her home at two-thirty the following morning. She was a little miffed at her husband's lack of curiosity; Sam had simply shrugged and said, "They're big kids; they'll be all right." He had gone to bed hours ago, and was contentedly snoring away. "How was your date?"

Natalia leaned back against the door, closed her eyes, and shook her head with a smile of happy disbelief.

"Perfect! Oh, Aunt Vika, it was better than perfect!"

"Did that big silly bear of a man behave himself?"

"He's not silly!" Natalia snapped before her voice went all dreamy again. "I've never been treated as well by any man as Billy treated me tonight." She giggled a little, then added, "He calls me 'Natty;' it's so cute!"

Victoria suddenly noticed her niece was wearing different clothes than the ones she had left in, and frowned, and then became a little alarmed.

My God, what have I done?

Her voice was sharp. "Where are your clothes?"

"At the cleaners. On the way out to eat, we were just getting ready to go into this nice restaurant and – Oh, I felt so stupid! – I caught my heel in a crack and fell flat on the pavement. There was a puddle there by the curb, and I found it."

Seeing her aunt laughing, she loudly declared, "It's not funny! Anyway, I thought my evening was over, that I had made a complete and utter ass out of myself, when Billy picked me up. I mean, he literally picked me up in his arms, and held me, and asked me if I was okay. I couldn't help it; I was crying and saying how sorry I was, and he kissed me – not on the lips, but on the forehead – and cuddled me and shushed me and told me everything would be all right. I had mud all over me, but he refused to put me down until he had carried me all the way back to the car and made sure I wasn't hurt beyond a couple of scrapes. He made me hold still while he put a bandage on my skinned knee. Then he drove me to a very nice store and insisted on buying me this dress so I'd have something clean to wear. After that, we went to eat, but we were too late for the movie, so he took me for dancing and drinks instead, and then for a walk in the park, down by the river."

"That sounds quite romantic. How many times did you have to fight him off?"

Did you fight him off? Did you even try?

"Not once! Oh, he held my hand and walked with his arm around me and kissed me goodnight – and my God, that man can *kiss!* – but he was the perfect gentleman. The funny thing is, I know so little about him, because he kept encouraging me to talk about myself. Some men do that, you know, wanting to gain your confidence, but he was different; he was really interested." She laughed. "I was afraid I was boring him, and my English is as bad as his Russian, so I don't think he understood more than every other word, but he kept

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encouraging me to go on and on about my life, my work, my hopes and dreams. It was almost like he was just enjoying the sound of my voice; I had the feeling he would have been content to spend the evening just doing that. He didn't judge me, and he didn't try to seduce me; I swear he seems to care about me for...me."

"I told you these Southerners set a high value on good behavior, and, while this one might be a little rough around the edges, he's even better than most of them about the really important things. I told you he's rich, but he wasn't always that way, and, even though he can be brash and mischievous, he has enough humility to remember how to behave. He's also a very rare animal: a natural romantic. So," her aunt asked as casually as she could, trying to keep the hope out of her voice, "are you going to see him again?"

Natalia nodded enthusiastically. "Oh yes! I'm meeting him for lunch at the Jefferson Hotel tomorrow; he's insisting on introducing me to President Gore and his wife – can you believe it? I've only been here for a day, and I'm going to meet the President of the country, one of the most famous and powerful men in the world! I tried to tell him that I was too embarrassed to ever do something like that, that I was only a...a...cheap nude model."

Victoria pursed her lips meaningfully at the sudden humiliation that crept into her niece's voice as her position truly came home to her, and the girl hung her head.

"And what did he say to that?"

Her niece smiled again, blushed and looked down.

"He was very angry. He said he was proud to be seen with me, honored to introduce me to his friends, that he respected me, and that he'd better never hear me say anything like that about myself again!" She deepened her voice in an exaggerated, bear-like growl, trying her best to imitate him, including shaking her finger just as he had. "'Nobody is going to put you down when I'm around, and that includes you!' He was serious too, and a little scary, not kidding around like he likes to do." Shaking her head, she giggled as she added, "He sounded so much like Father I was afraid for a moment he was going to pick me up and spank my backside!"

Victoria couldn't suppress a smile when she pictured the big man in full bluster mode.

"I don't think he'd actually go *that* far, but I wouldn't blame him if he did, and he's exactly right. As our family has been trying to tell you for more than a year now, you *are* much more than a cheap nude model, and I wish you'd act like it!

"Oh, and just so you know; Frank and Sammie know what you do; in fact, they helped me set this whole thing up. How do you think you got your visa so quickly?"

Natalia's eyes widened with disbelief.

"Are you saying the Confederate President and First Lady personally took the time and effort...for me?"

"Yes, because Billy is their friend. More than that, they literally regard him as a brother. They want him to be happy, and they think you might be able to give him that happiness. Billy said he saw something special in your eyes, and when I told them, that was good enough to make them to drop everything else and do what was needed to get you here. That's how much they think of this man, so if you won't listen to me, I think maybe you should at least listen to him."

"I will," she assured her. "There's just something about him..."

There must have been something about him, Victoria was to reflect later. Natalia kept putting off going home and blew off her Russian agent's repeated and increasingly frantic calls for photo shoots. When she thought she might finally need to go back for a job, Billy simply contacted her agent, bought her contract, and gave her the top modeling position with his company, posing in motorcycle ads as an at least marginally clothed model for a change, and gaining fame and a fair amount of merchandising income as "the Blade girl" in the process The pair were together every minute they could spare and went out practically every night, much to the delight of the paparazzi, who usually followed them in a pack, but kept a very respectful distance and demeanor after one of them foolishly shouted a rude question at Natalia as they were entering a theater. He quickly found his camera smashed and his nose broken by the same powerful blow, and himself stuffed upside down in the nearest trashcan by her irate boyfriend. Then, only six weeks later, Billy brought her home one Friday evening, both of them smiling like idiots, their expressions as bright as the huge diamond engagement ring that had somehow appeared on her finger. Four months after that, she left the Russian Orthodox Church in Charleston as Mrs. Natalia Sprouse, and it became a matter of several token wagers between his friends as to

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just how long it would take for Billy to get that silly triumphant grin off his face.

Of course, Natalia's own grin was just as silly, and seemed just as permanently etched on her features as her new husband's was...or the grin on her Aunt Victoria's face, who was so satisfied with the successful outcome of her own efforts she could hardly stand herself. In fact, Sam insisted she had become downright insufferable on the subject.

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DAY 1686

CHAPTER 78

Confederate News Service

President Gore pulled another rabbit out of his seemingly bottomless hat today, with the kind of revolutionary proposal on health care one would expect from a true rebel. He has announced that he will begin accepting bids from all insurance companies, both here and abroad, for a plan to insure all central government workers and military dependents, and maybe much more.

"*I would like to see everyone have access to healthcare, but I also have no intention of turning this country into a Socialist nanny state in order to do it. We've been there and done that when we were part of the United States; it didn't work then and it won't work now. Instead, it will be done through free choice and the free market.*"

Basically what will happen is that the Confederate Government will seek an insurance policy covering everyone working for them from the company or companies who can give the best price while still providing full coverage for all diseases, injuries, and non-elective surgeries. Further, that coverage will be extended to anyone who wants to buy into it.

"*Any individual, any organization, any company, or any state is welcome to sign onto the program,*" *the President told reporters today, "and they or their members will be accepted at the same price paid for government workers and the military. In fact, I encourage you to do so, because the more people are onboard, the cheaper the rates will be per person, which save both you and the government money. With millions and millions enrolled, the cost will be one the vast majority of people can afford." When asked by one journalist what that would mean to the very poor who still could not afford it, he pointed to the churches.*

"*I presume most churches are still in the charity business, and those wanting to enroll in the program and make it open to their members should also consider providing some financial assistance to those members too poor to pay it all themselves." With a smile, he added, "After all, charity begins at home."*

After the healthcare fiasco in the United States during the Obama Administration, many people were concerned about more of the same, but the bill does nothing of the kind. In fact, it expressly forbids anyone being coerced into accepting it. Further, other than the coverage for military dependents, it is not supported by tax dollars, but by the premiums paid by its members.

Sam still walked with a slight, almost imperceptible limp due to the injuries he received in the Columbia attack, but it got more noticeable when he was tired, like this evening. After he left his Vice Presidential offices for the day, he had spent the next hour answering questions from reporters at a press conference before working out. The almost-scalding hot shower he took afterward helped, but he still felt like his butt was dragging on the ground behind him when he entered their condo, only to find Victoria standing waiting with tears flowing in a steady river from her unnaturally wide eyes. Her hands waved helplessly and in no particular manner, and there was an utterly crazed smile on her face.

Oh God! She must be having a fit or something!

"Vika! Honey, what's wrong? Are you alright?"

Her mouth worked as she tried to speak, but no sound seemed to come. Finally, she got out, "Baby!" leaving him even more puzzled than before.

"What?"

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“Baby! We're...you and I...”

“What are you trying to tell me?”

Reaching for the table beside her, she snatched up a pregnancy test kit and waved it frantically in his face.

“We're having a baby!” she finally managed to yell.

He rocked back on his heels, and it was his turn to lose control of his speech. “B-b-baby?” he sputtered, and she nodded enthusiastically.

“Baby!”

It was two hours before the excitement died down enough that he even thought to pick up his jacket he had dropped unnoticed in the floor.

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DAY 2022

CHAPTER 79

John Bloom looked out in the direction of his studio audience. He didn't look *at* them, of course; they were nothing much to look at, and besides, he was the star here on *Night Blooming,* or, as his many detractors called the late night talk show, *Night Bloomers*. The host and his opinions were so controversial that many people turned into the program simply because they loved to hate him so much. In fact, they hated him nearly as much as he hated Frank Gore.

Bloom had been a closet pro-Unionist before the War, and had once been friends with the late LC Tarbox, whose narcissistic looks, mercenary spirit, and trouble-making propensity he shared. As such, the acting Confederate President represented everything he opposed.

He knew better than to be openly abusive. The Confederate Government wasn't big on censorship, but he knew there were more than a few patriotic people out there who tended to get real angry real quick when anyone insulted their hero; in fact, in many quarters, rude comments about Frank Gore, or especially Samantha, was a quick way to get a major league 'ass-whuppin,' as the people ready to administer it would say. Instead of a frontal attack, Bloom resorted to a combination of pointed questions and mean-spirited comedy, maligning Frank's style of governing, especially his alleged nepotism by surrounding himself with people he liked and trusted. Most of all, at least once a show, he questioned the CSA leader's courage.

"How do you explain that, President Gore?" he would ask rhetorically at the empty stage after some accusatory statement or the other, and would then look around meaningfully, as if he had lost something. "Mr. President? Mr. President?" He would then lift the sofa cushion and look beneath it. "Mr. President?" Shaking his head, he would add, "It looks like Elvis has left the building."

Inevitably at that point, one of the audience members, carefully separated from the sound stage by a line of burley security men in yellow tee shirts, would yell something at him, either calling him some term synonymous with coward, or telling him he wouldn't talk like that "if Frank was here!"

Bloom would always laugh at that point.

"But he isn't here, is he? And he won't be here. He hasn't got the guts to come on this show; he'd have to answer *real* questions then, not this fluff BS from the suck-ups in the Confederate press!"

Then he would turn and introduce his first guest.

Of course, due to threats of boycotts or to their own dislike of his antics, guests were getting harder and harder to come by lately, and the show's declining ratings were reflecting that. He was not only certain his contract would not be renewed, but knew beyond a doubt, if not for its provisions, he'd already be out, but he was what he was, and couldn't help himself. Still, he knew he was lucky to get the host and producer of *Conch Survivor,* a popular reality show out of Florida that involved a combination of wilderness survival and ocean navigation with a series of bar crawls, here with him tonight. That the guest was known to be a friend of Frank Gore made his acceptance of Bloom's invitation even more surprising.

"Ladies and gentleman, if you watch reality TV, my next guest needs no introduction. I give you hero of the Revolution and the host of *Conch Survivor*, Captain Davy Jones!"

Bloom made a sweeping gesture with his arm, raising it high, and then suddenly locked up, leaving it there as if it had snagged his cuff on something overhead. Davy Jones was entering, all right, wearing his trademark shaggy blond hair, Hawaiian shirt, cut-off jeans, and bare feet, but he was not alone. Beside him, in his dress gray uniform, was none other than President Frank Gore. The only thing the host could manage to move was his mouth, and it could only open and close silently, like a gaping fish.

"I brought the guest you've been asking for," Davy said, a cocky, smart-assed grin twisting his mouth as it fought a desperate battle to become a full-fledge belly laugh, "I didn't think you'd mind."

The audience roared their approval and gave Frank a spontaneous standing ovation.

Coming to himself enough to panic, Bloom made the cutting gesture in the direction of the crew, indicating

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that they should go to commercial, but nobody complied.

"Go to commercial!" he shouted, his voice high and tight, almost squeaking with tension, and he spared a glance at the control booth only to see his producer shaking his head, and one of the cameramen covertly giving him the finger. That was when he knew they were all involved in setting him up.

"Mister Bloom," Frank said coldly as he continued walking toward the host, "I understand you've been asking for me; well, here I am."

Knowing what Frank was capable of, and remembering all too well what had happened to Tarbox right on the chamber of Congress, Bloom took a hurried step backwards until his left heel caught on a camera cable, bringing his foot to a halt. Unfortunately, the motion of his upper body wasn't similarly arrested, and he fell flat on his ass on the carpeted stage.

Frank continued walking towards him, and, as he was already miked, the audience heard him say, loudly and clearly, "Careful; here, let me help you up."

Bloom wasn't having any of it, and was already running as he scrambled to his feet and disappeared offstage as fast as he could go. Frank looked at Davy.

"What's wrong with him? Have I got bad breath or something?"

The crowd, still standing, clapped their hands raw and howled with laughter, making it impossible to be heard for a brief period. When it finally died down, Davy cupped his hands and shouted up at the producer.

"You'd better send somebody to catch Bloom and bring him back."

"We've already done that."

"What do we do for a host until then?"

"You host it!" Carpenter called back. The crowd cheered their approval and Davy shrugged and sat down in Bloom's chair, leaning back and propping his bare feet on top of the desk as if he belonged there. Frank took the guest's couch, comfortably crossing his legs and propping an elbow on the armrest.

Carpenter hadn't lied, not entirely. He had sent a security guard after Bloom, just not to bring him back. Instead the guard hurried to the closed and locked dressing room door and, per the producer's instructions, shoved a rubber wedge-shaped doorstop beneath it and kicked it tightly in place to prevent it from being pushed open from the inside. Carpenter had already had the phone line to the room disconnected, and turned on the building's cell phone signal blockers; Bloom wouldn't be coming out or telling anyone about it until they were ready...which would be after the show

Frank knew from the beginning, from the minute Davy called him, that they were going to take Bloom by surprise. What he didn't know, although it didn't take him too long to figure it out, was he had just been used as a pawn in a studio coup.

Carpenter was determined to save the show, or at least its time slot, and was tired of both the low ratings and Bloom's attitude. He had secretly negotiated the whole thing beforehand with Davy Jones, offering him a substantial raise from his current show, whose contract for next season had yet to be finalized. Jones had accepted, provided filming for the show was moved to Miami, and the deal was done. All they had to do was get the current host to violate some provision of his contract – such as the one requiring him to be on stage except in the case of medical emergency – and he would be gone. That's why he secretly paid some big bucks to a psychologist who studied Bloom's personality, and predicted exactly how he would react to being unexpectedly confronted with Frank Gore.

The security guard with the door wedge and the phone cutoff had just been a little insurance policy in case he should try to change his mind. Carpenter knew it was a low-down, dirty trick, and smiled, knowing it was no more than the smart-assed son of a bitch deserved. Looking out at the crowd still surging with delighted surprise, and imagining phones ringing all over the Confederacy as people called friends to tell them, "Turn on the TV! You won't believe this!" not to mention what it would do for this night's ratings, he knew it was all worth it.

As Frank put the pieces together inside his head, he chuckled in admiration at the audacity of what they had done; that they had used him to do it, he didn't mind a bit, considering who they had done it to.

"So, Mr. President," Davy began, but Frank cut him off.

"We've known each other too long and too well for you to be calling me 'Mr.' anything, Davy."

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Davy grinned broadly.

"All right, Frank, what do you want to talk about this evening?"

Frank shrugged.

"You're the host. Ask whatever's on your mind."

"All right then, you asked for it."

The one-hour show ended up taking two, preempting the news and the late movie, all with Carpenter's full approval and continued encouragement. Davy asked his own questions, and being a staunch states' rights advocate himself, some of them were quite pointed. Frank answered them all, as well as insisting on answering the questions the departed Mr. Bloom had been asking over the past weeks.

First, he explained one of his most controversial decisions, one that led Bloom to call him a "red socialist."

"Yes, I put Dixie's interstate energy companies – oil, coal, electricity, and gasoline – under strict regulation as public utilities, because that's exactly what they are; part of our basic, necessary infrastructure, without which the country cannot function. I will not tolerate – and I hope none of those who come after me will ever tolerate – what was nothing less than the economic sodomizing of the Southern people by greedy corporatists, gouging them for what they had to have to live a normal life. Before anyone condemns me for it, take a look at the energy industry. Right now, more people are employed in it than ever, and, under the regulations provided by the system I put in place, additional profits are divided three ways: between the company itself, the workers, and in price cuts for the consumers. Right now, you're paying a third or less than what you were for gas and electricity, the energy company employees' wages are constantly going up, as are the profits of the CEOs and stockholders. As a result, other energy-consuming industries are expanding, and passing their saving on to their customers. Everybody is benefiting, not just a handful of people doing it on the backs of others; no matter how you twist it, the old way was an idea that proved to be a failure by its results, because in the end, it's the results that matter. Seriously; does anyone here in this crowd really want to go back to paying what you did for gas and electricity before the Revolution, and for goods from the businesses that use them?"

Then he explained how the massive foreign investments in the CSA Bloom had complained about were not a hazard.

"We have investments in our infrastructure from all over the world right now; Japan and Italy are building automotive plants, Russia is opening up a series of large industrial factories, and China is building a modern high-speed rail system. Russian, Australian and Irish investors are modernizing our airports, while all the above and more are investing in our other industries.

"Because of this, Dixie is working again; on average, the South today has less than 2% unemployment. Things are better here than they've ever been.

"I'm concerned about internationalization too, but we need to remember two things. First, we simply don't have the money to do it ourselves yet, and second, we are still in control of what is going on here, because it is here, in the Confederacy. As long as these factories and other projects are built on Southern soil by Southern workers, pay Southern taxes, operate by Southern rules, and are staffed by Southern employees, they are Southern companies, regardless of where they're headquartered or whose name is on letterhead. These people are investing in us, building things here that we can't afford to build ourselves, so it's either accept it or do without.

"I don't know about you, but I can't tell the millions of Southerners working and actually getting ahead for the first time in generations – buying their own land, their own homes – to go back to their cotton sacks, or back to the minimum wage fast food counter.

"Besides, in case anyone hasn't noticed, more and more Southerners are finally getting back on their economic feet enough to invest here themselves, with my friend Billy Sprouse's Blade Motorcycle Company being a perfect example. These foreign investments are allowing our people to begin to make money enough to start businesses of their own, and be their own bosses for a change."

He also confirmed Bloom's assertion that he was going to "waste money" in space.

"Yes, I'm wasting money by *allowing* the space-faring international community to put over thirty-five-

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thousand Southerners to work rebuilding and expanding the International Spaceports at Houston and Cape Canaveral, with a third being planned in the Baja away from populated areas, exclusively for experimental spacecraft and drive systems and potentially hazardous payloads. I'm wasting money by letting willing investors to fund the Confederate States of America's way to becoming the world's central hub for the burgeoning business of space travel. I'm wasting money because I say the Confederacy has as much right and as much need to walk among the stars as any other nation, and to reap benefits from doing so that we can't even begin imagine!"

Then Frank requested Davy give the audience a chance.

For the most part, they simply wanted to congratulate Frank and express their admiration, but a few had questions he hadn't answered yet. One man did in particular.

"Yes sir, and your name is?" Davy asked as audience member stood up and accepted the microphone from the usher.

"Simon Goode," the man said. He was about Frank's height, twenty or thirty pounds heavier and five years older, and, although obviously nervous, it was equally plain he was determined. "General Gore, there are a lot of people out here, including me, that believe you're acting like a tyrant!" The audience was suddenly filled with booing and shouts of outrage, but he yelled over top of them, "What do you have to say about that?"

"Come on up, Mr. Goode," Frank said with an easygoing smile, "and let's talk." Turning to the new host, he added, "Davy, would you mind getting someone to mic him so he doesn't have to fool with that big thing?"

Goode looked like he had just swallowed something far too large for his throat, but he came forward, knees trembling, and Frank stood and shook his hand even as a technician clipped the microphone on his lapel.

"Here; let's sit down on the couch and talk like civilized people."

Once they were seated at opposite ends with a comfortable distance between them, Frank said, "I am acting like a tyrant, because right now, that's exactly what I am."

Still looking at Goode but speaking to the audience, he went on.

"I never wanted to be a politician; shoot, I'm not a politician. That's why I still wear this uniform. I'm a Confederate soldier that the Congress voted unanimously to put in charge during a time of national emergency, and gave me unlimited power for the remainder of the late President Edge's term, unless they decide to revoke it beforehand. They have that power; I can be removed by a two-thirds majority vote at anytime. You know that, right?"

"Yes sir."

"Then why do you think they haven't done that? Why has none of them even brought it up?"

"I...I don't know. Maybe they're...afraid."

"Of me?" Frank's puzzlement was obvious. "Why?"

Goode swallowed hard once more, licking his lips before speaking, suddenly realizing the potential implications of what he was about to say to himself…

"You have the power to have them killed, or make them disappear."

Frank looked taken aback.

"Have I done that?"

"During the war; you did it then."

"Considering the circumstances, with hundreds of thousands of Mexicans pouring across our Southern border, raping and killing as they came, and the US preparing to launch a second front from the North, did I have any choice other than ordering the arrests of the traitors who were secretly working against us in our own ranks? If you recall, it was state militia forces who carried out most of those arrests, not Central Government forces."

"Well..." When he hesitated, Frank went on.

"You've got a Southern accent; you're not an immigrant. You were here then, and my guess is you fought with your militia unit; is that right?"

"Yes sir; I'm a sergeant with the 10th Missouri."

"The 10th? You were in the northern arm of the pincer that reinforced East Texas Militia then?"

"Yes sir!" he proudly affirmed, "I was there when we closed the grip and linked up with the Marines south

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of San Antonio."

"And you all did one hell of a good job. So you know what was happening then, not just in Texas, but all across Dixie. Our government had been virtually wiped out, and we were facing invasions from two directions. You know what was at stake. What would you have done in my place?"

Goode struggled for an answer, and then dropped his head and shook it. When it came, his voice carried a note of shame.

"Probably the same damned thing."

"So at least you don't blame me for that. Has the Central Government been even peripherally responsible for any summary executions or disappearances since then that you know of? Any at all?"

"I don't know..."

"If you do, tell me now," Frank said, dead serious, "because I want to know about it. If you know of any instance where you even *suspect* this has happened at the hands of the Central Government, I'll appoint an independent commission of inquiry to look into it, and I will appoint you to be in charge of it."

Goode's head popped up in surprise.

"Me?"

"You."

"But...why me? I'm not qualified to do something like that!"

"Yes you are. You're qualified because you obviously care enough not to be afraid to speak up about it to the man you think might be responsible for it, and in front of a hostile crowd to boot, so I have no doubt you'd do a thorough job."

"Thank you, sir," he said, somewhat awed by the offer, "and I'd take you up on that, but I've never heard of any instance where it's happened since then."

"So, what else am I doing you disagree with?"

His hands bounced up and down as he sought to articulate his concerns into words.

"General, it's not what you're doing, exactly; it's *how* you're doing it."

"You think I'm doing the right thing, but I'm going about it the wrong way?"

Goode nodded vigorously.

"Yes sir. We're supposed to be a states' rights government, not a centralized one, with dictates coming down from Richmond on how we should live, especially not from one man."

"You're going to have a states' rights government in less than three years time, when I leave office. In fact…well, I had planned to announce this in a few days, but now is as good a time as any. Internal power is being returned to the states in less than a year's time. Any election held with the states less than fully free will be tainted in the eyes of many; that's why I'm going to ask for the states to hold their own internal elections two years before my term is up, about a year from now. A couple of years after that, I'll be gone, and anything I've done, the Congress and the states will have the power to do with it or undo it as they see fit. Hopefully they'll start with a Constitutional Convention, just to get everything up to date."

"You'll really be leaving then?" the man asked skeptically, "You're actually going to give up all this power, step down, and walk away at the end of your term?"

"No sir, I'm not walking; I intend to *run* out of there at the end of my term just as fast as I can go! I've had a bellyful of politics, and all I want to do is to spend the rest of my life finally being able to be a real husband to my wife and a real father to my children."

Goode nodded, finally beginning to understand, and then asked, "Your word on it, sir?"

"You have my word and my hand on it, Sergeant Goode."

Goode took both, looked Frank in the eye, and said, "That's good enough for me, then."

As the audience cheered, Frank thoughtfully stroked his chin for a second, and went with his gut decision.

"Tell you what; I know there are a lot of people out there who feel the same way you do, so why don't you do this? Make a list of the limitations you'd like to see on the Central Government, and have it ready in two weeks. Come on up to Richmond, and you can address your concerns directly to Congress and to me, and I suspect you'll find some receptive ears."

"Sir, I'm a member of the States' Rights Coalition; I'm sure their leaders would be – "

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“Not them,” Frank said, firmly cutting him off, “you. The real leader of any organization is the one out in front, doing the work and taking the chances, like you are, and that’s the only one I intend to talk to. I don’t have time to waste on a bunch of self-appointed, self-important jackasses whose idea of activism is to sit behind a keyboard and pound out one or two missives a month and a bunch of flame mails.”

The audience howled with mirth and Goode involuntarily began laughing, and covered his mouth in an attempt to stop it, but to no avail. Frank had just stated his own private opinions about his organizational leadership, as well as those of a lot of his fellow members.

Finally managing to get his breath, Goode wheezed, “You do keep track of what’s going on, don’t you?”

“That’s my job,” Frank told him with a smile, “and letting the Congress know your concerns is your job, so be there, okay? And be ready to stay for a week or two.”

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DAY 2069

CHAPTER 80

Confederate News Service

Today, in yet another surprise move among many, President Gore, with the unanimous approval of the Congress, laid down his own commandments of the Central Government, limiting the powers of all branches upon resumption of the regular government after the coming election. Called the Goode Bill, after the Missouri Sergeant who came up with most of it (and was expelled from the States' Rights Coalition for agreeing to meet with the President and the Congress without the group's leaders), it has insured that our government will never go back to the old corrupt ways of the US, and that a one or two party monopoly will never exist in the Confederacy. Instead of describing the Goode Law, we will simply show its provisions in their entirety, as they are written in plain English, which this reporter sincerely hopes will become a hallmark of all future Confederate law.

1. All debates and votes on the floor of the Congress, and all trials in Federal Court, shall be open to the public and televised live, save only for debates on classified intelligence matters.
2. All votes, in committee or on the floor, shall be by roll call and shall be recorded, with those records immediately made available to the public within twenty-four hours of the vote. No voice votes or other unrecorded votes will be permitted under any circumstances. Congressmen shall not have the right to change the official record of their vote after the fact.
3. Congress, the President, and all other members of the Government of the Confederate States of America shall be subject to the same civil and criminal laws as the citizenry, with no immunities or exemptions to those laws allowed.
4. Congressional salaries shall be set by the individual Congressman's respective state, and paid by the same. The President's salary shall be set by Congress.
5. All House members in each state shall be elected by the people of their state, while all Senate members shall be appointed by their state's government.
6. Congress shall not have the right to refuse to seat any member of the House or Senate duly elected or appointed by his state, nor shall they have the right to prevent him from speaking within the rules set by Congress, nor shall they prevent him from voting, nor shall Congress have the right to remove a sitting member without permission of their state except when convicted of the crimes of rape, murder, sabotage, or treason.
7. Congress shall not have the right to delegate any binding regulatory powers to any other agency, and no non-elected agent or agency of the Government of the Confederate States of America shall be permitted to enact any rule or regulation that has the force of law, without a formal vote on that rule or regulation by the Congress.
8. No member of Congress may vote on any bill he has not read or had read to him. Accordingly, every bill not dealing with classified intelligence matters will be publicly read aloud in its entirety on the floor of both the House and Senate prior to any vote, and all such readings will be televised in their entirety, with the said text made available to the public.
9. In order to preserve harmony between the Central Government and the states, no law may be

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passed by Congress without a two-thirds majority. If the President vetoes the law, Congress may override it by a second, confirming vote with at least a two-thirds majority plus one. This will be one of the suggested Constitutional changes, but will remain voluntarily in effect until then.

10. Except in case of attack or invasion against the Confederacy, or in the emergency rescue of Confederate citizens abroad, the President shall have no power to wage war without approval of Congress.

11. Congress shall not abrogate its right to declare war to the President or any other party, nor, other than as outlined in item 10, shall any war be fought without such declaration.

12. Except in time of emergency as declared by the Congress, the President shall make no declarations or regulations of any kind outside of those solely affecting the internal workings of his own cabinet or the military that have the force of law. No non-emergency executive order shall have the force of law outside the military, and all emergency executive orders shall automatically expire with the emergency itself.

13. No Congressman, President, or Supreme Court Justice, or any Federal Justice, shall accept any gratuity, bribe or gift from any lobbyist while they are in office.

14. Any agent of a foreign government, or any citizen acting on behalf of the interests of a foreign government, must register as such beforehand with the Congressional Registrar, with the record of all such registrations to be readily accessible to the public.

15. Any decision by the Supreme Court, or of any Confederate lower court, excepting state courts, may be challenged by the President or Congress, and in the event of such a challenge, Congress shall be required to put the matter to a vote. A two-thirds majority and the signature of the President shall be sufficient to override any court decision.

16. No person or corporation from one state, or any interstate or international corporation or organization of any kind, may interfere in any way in any election in another state, whether by donating money or by appearing on that state's sovereign territory to lobby, or do any work, compensated or not, or take part in any demonstration or protest on that state's soil, for or directly related to any candidate, ballot issue, or proposed ballot issue within the borders of that state. No foreign power, organization, or non-citizen may do so at all.

17. Except during time of legally-declared war, the Confederate States of America shall not practice deficit spending, but will balance the budget each fiscal year.

Some of these provisions will require Constitutional Amendments, but President Gore has already called for a Constitutional Convention, specifying that it should take place after the election, in order to allow the chosen representatives of the people and the states to make those decisions, rather than Revolutionary Government appointees.

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States' Rights Coalition Official Communication

As of the annual convention this past weekend, the Chairman and Vice Chairman, along with six of the nine members of the Board of Directors, were forcibly removed from office by the direct action of the membership. They attempted to prevent a no confidence vote on the subject, so the membership was forced to act regardless. All of these individuals were involved in the illegal removal of Simon Goode from the SRC membership, bringing shame upon the organization.

Once the disgraced officers were expelled and removed from the premises by security, the Secretary, Treasurer, and remaining BOD members stood for the first general election by the membership the SRC ever held, and were reelected, and the other officers replaced. Not surprisingly, considering the enormous scope of his accomplishments, the newly elected President by unanimous vote is Simon Goode, who has vowed to take the organization in a more activist direction, and to work closely with the Confederate Central Government in order to insure that states' rights are protected.

President Goode has also launched an exploratory committee for a possible Missouri gubernatorial campaign, on a platform of protecting his state's rights while working with the Confederate Government for the common good…

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Confederate Independent News

In a move that took the entire Confederacy by surprise, rival Presidential candidates Jack Boggess and TJ Ashby have declared that they will be campaigning together.

"This is a rare time in the history of the world," Boggess said, "It's a win-win situation for the people. Whichever one of us wins, the Confederacy wins."

"Absolutely!" Ashby told reporters in the same interview. "Besides, we're friends, and I like to think we're gentlemen, and running for the same office shouldn't be allowed to change that."

The pair, along with their staffs and their wives, who are also very close, will be traveling together to every Confederate state in a series of whistle stop and flying tours before the election, staying at the same hotels, eating at the same restaurants, and sharing campaign expenses. They've even been seen playing one-on-one basketball together on local courts.

Mrs. Ashby and Mrs. Boggess have admitted that they're looking forward to the trip.

"Our husbands are the ones working," Mrs. Ashby joked with reporters Monday, "and Philindy and I will be the ones shopping."

Mrs. Boggess added, "I'll be traveling with friends, going new places, meeting new people, and eating out every day. No cooking, no dirty dishes: for Jane and I, this will be a vacation."

When asked how they planned to deal with political questions, Mrs. Ashby told reporters that they would be referring all such matters to their husbands.

"It goes without saying we'll each be supporting our own husband," Mrs. Boggess was quoted, "but they're the ones running, not us."

This extremely unusual situation has caught the attention of those overseas as well. British MP Nigel Miller, said, "The world has never seen an election campaign quite like this one. This is, perhaps, a somewhat humbling lesson for us all on the way in which gentlemen ought to do things."

Some of the other prospective candidates' views of the situation are not quite so charitable, and more than one of them have referred to it as a "cheap stunt." Cheap stunt or not, the fact remains that, even before this campaign tour was announced, Ashby and Boggess were already the front runners in the popularity contest, neck and neck with one another, but head and shoulders above all the rest in the opinion polls. After their announcement, though, they have left the competition in the dust, leaving less than 20% of favorable public opinion to those increasingly in danger of becoming the "also rans."

Some pundits have suggested that the idea for this "joint operation" originated, not with the leading candidates themselves, but with their mutual friend, President Frank Gore. Even though this would represent the type of outside-the-box thinking the President is famous for, there is no evidence for it, one way or another, and the candidates aren't talking.

Still, in the end, if it's a good idea, does it really matter who thought it up?

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DAY 3105

CHAPTER 81

CSA News Network

The final election results are in, and Congressman Jack Boggess of Virginia is the next President, and the first freely-elected President in the history of the Confederate States of America, with 52% of the popular vote.

As we know, Congressman Boggess' primary opponent and personal friend, Congressman TJ Ashby, ran primarily on his tremendous accomplishment of setting up the treaty that gave birth to Pacific Economic and Defense Alliance; however, it seems that the Confederate public were more swayed by the Virginian's domestic accomplishment of reuniting the Virginias, although many pundits insist it was actually his famous speech of defiance on the floor of the United Nations that ultimately carried the day in the hearts of the common people. At any rate, Congressman Ashby received 46% of the vote, with the remaining 2% spread out among six other candidates.

Both Congressmen were watching the results together in the famous James Hotel's posh ball room in Richmond, along with their families, supporters, and friends that included President and Mrs. Gore. The President congratulated both men, and the President-Elect declared that his opponent would become his Vice President. The celebrations went on until morning, and not just in Richmond, but all over Dixie, because we have finally, fully resumed our status as a full-fledged nation of free men.

The President- and Vice President-Elect will both be sworn in thirty days from the election; in the meantime, they and their staffs will be working closely with President Gore and Vice President Wirtz in order to assure a smooth transition of power.

In related news, President Gore has announced that he will not be returning to South Carolina at the end of his term, but will be taking up residence in the Yucatan. When asked why, he had this to say:

"First, I need a fresh start with my family; I've never been able to give them a normal life, and I never will with something to bring back the memories of the blood and death we went through lurking around every corner to remind us.

"Secondly, although I've never viewed myself that way, many people claim I'm some sort of hero, and, if I'm still here, they'll be looking at me instead of the duly-elected Government to see what I'll do or what I have to say. The Confederacy doesn't need that – I don't need it! I'm the symbol of a necessary stage in our country's development, but that stage is over and done with, thank God. It's better that I step completely out of the way, and leave my part in this thing to the history books, where it belongs.

"Finally, I have a selfish reason; I'm tired. For most of a decade now I've been Frank Gore the soldier, Frank Gore the General, Frank Gore the President. Somewhere along the way, I lost contact with Frank Gore the man, and I need time to make his acquaintance again."

"What will your first act as President be, President Boggess?"

Before answering the reporter, Jack looked meaningfully at TJ, who nodded his agreement to the unspoken understanding that passed between them.

"We'll be working directly with President Gore and Mr. Dayton during the coming month. I don't think they left anything major undone, but I still intend to check the records; there are probably still some minor loose ends that need to be tied up before everything is taken care of."

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DAY 3120

CHAPTER 82

"Good afternoon, Mr. Ostrovsky. My name is Herschel, and I'll be your server today; would you like to see a menu?"

The waiter, whose name was not Herschel and whose native Tennessee accent wasn't anything resembling what had just come out of his mouth, kept the carefully-trained mask that was his face held in its most professional, friendly, and servile expression as he spoke. His demeanor perfectly matched his starched white shirt, black pants, and black tie that were the uniform in the trendy, upscale restaurant.

John Ostrovsky carefully looked him over, sliding his glasses down his long, hooked nose. He was a creature of comfortable habit, and this new waiter was not what he had expected. The NSA head's suit, let alone the enormous gold and diamond ring on his finger, cost more than the waiter would make in months, and he was checking "Herschel's" attitude as well as his appearance to ensure he properly displayed the deference that status entailed. That someone on the staff had obviously taken the time to tell him just *who* Ostrovsky was, and that he had acted on that information, was a minor point in his favor, although the powerful man considered that no more than his due.

"Are you new here? I don't believe I've seen you before."

"I just started last week, sir." That much was true, and Ostrovsky, along with his habit of having lunch at this particular restaurant nearly every day was the reason for the man's choice of temporary employment, although the Feds would never be allowed to know that.

"Where's Sylvia? She's usually the one who waits on me."

"I'm sorry, sir, but I'm afraid she's sick today; I'm her replacement." After a moment, he added, "Sylvia said you were her favorite customer and told me to take especially good care of you."

All this was also true. Sylvia was indeed sick, because yesterday just before she left, the man who called himself "Herschel" had slipped a carefully measured dose of a mild biologic toxin into her diet cola. It would do no permanent harm, but she would be laid up with vomiting and diarrhea for at least a day or two. The Southerner felt bad about that; Sylvia was hard working and very personable, but his mission was more important than her temporary comfort.

He never changed expression as Ostrovsky looked him up and down one more time, studying him from the top of his stylishly cut dark hair to the toes of his spit-shined shoes, and apparently found no faults worthy of complaint.

"Very well then. I'll have the prime rib, medium rare."

While the customer's meal was being prepared, the agent went about his duties with the same exactness and attention to detail he applied to every endeavor, but despite his promptness in refilling a glass or delivering a smiling platitude to the other guests in his section, his mind remained on his mission.

He hadn't been born Herschel Stein, but that's who his driver's license, checkbook, and other paper work claimed he was. There had been another Herschel Stein about his age until recently, an ecstasy and cocaine dealer and child pimp who had very wisely fled Miami one step ahead of the Confederate takeover. Once he reached safety in the Northeast, the original Stein had taken up where he left off, by investing in the part ownership of a New York City bordello where Eastern European women were lured into the country illegally and then forced into sexual slavery by the American branch of the Russian Jewish Mafia. The Southerner knew all about Stein because he had studied him thoroughly before he had stalked and killed him, and fed the crabs with his cut up remains along a mile stretch of New Jersey salt marsh. The Jew's identity had proven useful so far; after all, it had gotten him the opportunity to get in close physical proximity to his primary target

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of John Ostrovsky.

The agent was more than dedicated to his country, the CSA; he was also a man raised to believe in justice.

This particular mission had been in the planning stages deep within the confines of the Confederate Intelligence Service as a pet project of its Director, Mike Dayton, for years. Ostrovsky had become too powerful, too great of a threat, and had too much blood on his hands for him to be ignored. The selection and subsequent disposal of Stein and the assumption of his identity were necessary steps in providing the opaque layers needed to accomplish this ultra-secret mission, a mission unlike the others. No one wanted to start a war or make the NSA Head an obvious martyr by doing something simple like shooting him; that would make him a rallying point. Instead, it would be for the best if this enemy of his people simply faded away.

Entering the kitchen, he loaded Ostrovsky's plate onto a tray, surreptitiously glanced around before picking it up, then carried it out and served it with all the prerequisite politeness. Mollified if not particularly impressed, the powerful man ate, marked down a tip for exactly 15% on the bill that his expense account was covering, and left the restaurant. The agent watched him go through the windows until the silver Mercedes disappeared around the corner, and then turned back to work with a smile.

He would finish this shift so as not to leave the place that had been kind enough to give him a job short handed, and early tomorrow morning he would phone in his resignation, telling them that he had found more lucrative employment elsewhere. His work here was done.

Ostrovsky didn't know it, nor would anyone else for a month or more, but the spymaster was already a dead man walking. When the agent had paused over his food, he had squirted it with a concentrate made from the fruits of a particular shrub found near the Confederacy's southern border. The Southerner was not a cruel man; he preferred a quick kill, but he was also willing to work within the existing conditions. The concentrated juice of the black fruit of *Karwinskia humboldtiana* - called "Coyotilla" or "Tullidora" by the Mestizos and "Buckthorn" by the Whites – that the hunter had applied from a sinus spray bottle would soon begin its deadly work. Many weeks later, long after the lunch and the new waiter were forgotten, the irreversible paralysis of Ostrovsky's nervous system would begin, and continue over months until it would no longer activate his own respiration. The odds were that no one would ever determine the cause, and if they did, they would never find out for sure where it came from.

An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth…

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DAY 3135

CHAPTER 83

Frank looked out the limo's window as they were driven south from Richmond, and was pleased with what he saw. The roads were clean, stores were open, and people were going about their business, usually with a spring in their steps and smiles on their faces. He saw hope, and he was proud that he had been given the opportunity to help them gain that.

It was a new South, very different from the one he had inherited; there was no question about that. For all practical purposes, there was no real unemployment; in fact, there were so many jobs still open that businesses were asking the Central Government to step up the immigration quotas from ethnic European countries in order to keep up with the demand. As a result, wages continued to rise in an effort to attract the best workers, and, for the first time since the boom following World War II, the average person was making real money.

About the only sector where jobs had been lost was the prison industry; the South now had one of the lowest rates of serious violent crime in the developed world. Children could go out unattended, and people could walk the city streets at any hour of the day or night with little fear. Added to the booming economy, the low crime rate gave the Confederacy one of the highest average standards of living.

He looked over at Samantha sitting beside him and smiled. He wasn't the only one who had made some accomplishments.

She had purchased the property where she had led the force that had recovered Mike, Tommy, Donna, and dozens of others from their torturers, and had hanged their surviving captors. With heavy private contributions – *It's surprising how generous companies can get when they're trying to curry favor with the First Lady,* she thought – the building was repaired and expanded, and was now the Kerrie O'Brien Academy for Young Ladies, a private school for girls of exceptional talents but difficult circumstances, like those of its namesake. Kerrie herself was there, her remains having moved with great ceremony from her secret guerrilla's grave to the white marble tomb that stood in front, at the foot of the flag pole. Her bronze statue was atop the tomb, holding a bouquet of flowers, and below, on the front, were the words, *Kerrie O'Brien: abused child, brave soldier, beloved friend.*

That's what it said when you could see the words, anyway; a tradition had quickly grown up with the students and teachers to place flowers at the tomb at every opportunity, and their tributes often covered the lines up. The students swore that the school and its dormitories were haunted by those who died violently there, but that, if they called Kerrie's name in the darkness of their rooms, a gentleness instantly filled the space, and the bad spirits, and the bad dreams they brought, went away.

Samantha had no idea as to the truth of that particular legend, but she made no effort to find out either.

There are some things in this world that, if they're not true, they ought to be!

The Academy might have been her first love amongst her projects, but foremost in fame was the National Library of the Confederate States of America.

Located in Montgomery (Several cities and states had bid to be the ones to build it, not only for the honor, but for the continuous economic benefit from the visitors), the Library looked like a college campus and covered several city blocks with its multi-story brick buildings and beautifully landscaped grounds of botanical gardens and sculptures. With an enormous collection of books, manuscripts, artwork, and electronic files, it was the largest such research center in the world. The staff was continuously putting the books into the copy-restricted electronic lending format to allow access from anywhere in the Confederacy, and half a dozen supercomputers kept track of everything. Truth was all here, and there were no sacred cows protected from examination. Even though most of the contents were available online and more becoming available by the day, people still came from all over the South – all over the world – to sort through the shelves and to freely

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debate the other scholars and journalists in the lecture halls provided; many others simply came to sit and listen to the latter's discussions and discourses. Still more foreigners came to learn of things illegal to question in their own countries, like the official versions of World War II or certain racial issues. Often, she had seen people simply stop to stare in rapt contemplation at the thirty-foot high bronze statue of Diogenes the truth-seeker that stood in front, his bronze lantern held high, shining its eternal flame day and night. To enter the campus, one had to walk through a stone arch, emblazoned with the Latin motto, *The truth will set you free.*

As he thought about that, Frank felt a twinge in his leg from the old wounds, and another in his heart from the deeper, much more severe hurts that would never completely heal.

It will do that, as long as it's accompanied by the will and the means to enforce it.

That thought had occurred to him strongly a few hours ago, when he stood at the base of the North Carolina holler where the 1st Columbia Irregulars had made their last stand during the Third Revolution, had fought to the last man, giving their lives for him. It was now the terminus of a popular walking and running trail that began at the site of the mountaintop garage where Frank was almost killed; an annual commemorative race was held there every year on the date of the event, and drew thousands of Southerners.

When he had gotten out of the car, he walked up the holler alone, to the giant granite monument to his men who had fought and died there. Samantha stayed behind. He hadn't asked her to, but she knew her husband well enough to know this was something he needed to do himself. She watched, though, staring at his back as he made his way to the statue that stood on that hallowed ground. He looked at it for a long time, at the polished granite guerrilla made much larger than life, and the fifty-foot obelisk with the Medal of Honor carved in it that the statue stood in front of, on guard and rifle forever at the ready. Mostly, he read and re-read the words on the bronze plaque at the base:

Here stood the last of the 1st Columbia Irregulars.
Here the last man fell with his face toward the enemy.
Here you stand on hallowed ground
That the bravest of the brave bought with their blood.
Never forget!

Samantha's heart ached as she watched her husband stand for a long time. She had a sense that he was speaking, but he was too far away for her to hear, and anyway, the words weren't meant for her. Finally he saluted, and slipped his sunglasses on before turning back to the car. As soon as the door shut behind him, he said, "Let's go," and didn't look back.

Finally they reached their last stop. One of the Irregulars, honor guards to his convoy, kept the twins and their latest, year-old addition, little Donna, in the limousine with him while Frank and Samantha got out alone.

The rest of the Irregulars had cleared the Memorial Plaza that sat where the old capital grounds had bordered on Gervais Street at its intersection with Main. The bombed out area had been filled, and capped with a circular sea of granite slabs carved with the names of the dead, both the identified and those whose remaining atoms lay mixed with the soil beneath. Bronze statues in the images of the missing stood here and there, arranged almost at random, nearly all of them men and women the pair recognized. As they stepped alone across the stone, they had to smile. The artist had placed the life-sized images of Edge and MacFie in a posture of eternal debate. Despite the late President's frown and the doctor's bristling metallic beard that defined the heat of their unknown argument, the sculptor caught them in a moment of distraction, their heads just beginning to turn in the same direction. Their gaze, like the gaze of every other figure in the plaza, turned towards the centerpiece of the display.

A large pool made of white marble held a flagpole in its middle, surrounded by a circle of fountain jets. The pole was held in turn in the upraised hand of a bare-breasted marble Linda Waddell with her other hand resting on the pommel of a sword, looking for all the world like an Amazon queen. Topped with a cross, a Battle Flag moved almost imperceptibly, stirred as if by the fingers of a ghost in the faint Southern breeze.

A trio of sculptures stood just outside the central display, closest to the water. Frank and Samantha moved closer, and took a long last look at them. Tommy, the irascible Tommy, seemed to live again, his scarred, bearded face wreathed in a triumphant smile. A pregnant Donna stood at his side with an identical grin,

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clinging lovingly to his arm. His other arm was occupied with little Linda, her mouth open forever in mid-squeal as she pointed a chubby finger at the display with delight. At their feet on the fountain's marble edge were carved the words, "THE PRICE OF A DREAM".

Holding hands with one another while placing their other hand on the bronze memorial to their little girl, they stayed there for a long time, as the Irregulars turned their backs to give them privacy. Finally they turned and walked together to the car, and never looked back.

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EPILOGUE

Sam and Victoria Wirtz named their only daughter Sammie, and named Frank Gore as her Godfather. They moved to a farm outside Conway, South Carolina, although it was more of a hobby than anything else, as his other business interests occupied most of his time. Through a series of careful investments, he owned the most popular barbecue chain in the Confederacy, with branches in every state and a few foreign countries, several Blade Motorcycle dealerships, and, in partnership with Frank Gore, Dixie Investments Incorporated, a business conglomerate that included numerous resorts and hotels, three breweries, a cocoa farm, a premium tequila distillery, and a large tobacco plantation and cigar factory in the new territories.

Billy and Natalia Sprouse had six children, four boys and two girls. He continued leaving his business to more experienced management, preferring to spend as much time as possible with his family. Some noted that, even though the multiple births may have cost Natalia some of her model's figure, Billy didn't seem to mind in the least. They built a mansion high on a mountain overlooking the New River Gorge in the mountains of western Virginia, two hours from the first of his eight motorcycle plants.

Michael and Cynthia Dayton were married in a double wedding, along with her mother Carla and Larry Hall, a ceremony that saw President Gore as the best man and Samantha as the maid of honor for both couples. A year later, an experimental bone marrow transplant carried out in Russia caused Cynthia's HIV to go into remission, and eventually to become undetectable. Two years afterward, they had their first of two children, a baby girl they named Kerrie. Mike continued in his intelligence post and bought an antebellum house in Richmond, while Carla moved with her husband to Glen Ferris, in western Virginia, in a house with a view of the falls of the Kanawha River.

Jack Boggess served out his term as President, and was succeeded by his Vice President, TJ Ashby. Afterwards, he, his wife Philindy, and their three children moved to Norfolk, where he became the chief power broker in Virginia politics on both sides of the mountains for decades.

Ronald Hodges left his position as Chief of Security for the Confederate Government early and returned to Columbia, in order to make a successful run for Lieutenant Governor of South Carolina, with President Gore's and Governor John Carter's endorsement. He would eventually win the gubernatorial seat itself, and became the most effective Governor the Palmetto State ever had. He married a local girl, a preacher's daughter, and had four children, all boys.

Danny Drucci took over from General Hodges, but left after Frank's term was up. His good looks caught the attention of the movie studios in Wilmington, and he became the South's most popular leading man in action and romance movies, and went on to write a best-selling autobiography, THE REBEL FROM NEW YORK. Married to his Charleston Catholic high school sweetheart, Beth Daniels, they moved into a three centuries-old mansion in the Southern town where he had grown to adulthood, and raised seven children.

Casey Graham continued as the Palmetto Militia Commander after Frank's departure, until he shocked everyone by getting saved while attending a service by Reverend Jase. Resigning his post, the colorful, one-eared irascible veteran devoted his life to God and turned to preaching, becoming a fixture on Confederate Christian Broadcasting. Never one to do things half-way, he married Reverend Jase's granddaughter, with whom he fathered nine children.

"Lucky Charlie" Carnes continued his career in the military, replacing General Lannigan when the latter was forced to retire after a heart attack. Under his command, the Confederate Marine Corps became the best and most feared ground force in the world. His wife Rachel remained totally devoted to him, and produced three more children.

Rick Carmichael married Tiffany and sired four children. Hand-picked by Frank Gore, he was trained in and ultimately took over the management of a string of resorts on the Baja, owned by the former President and Vice President's company, Dixie Investments.

Both Nobuo Hiro and his wife Asami recovered from their wounds. His involvement in securing the friendship of the Confederacy, helping to develop the Alliance and, later assisting Japan in becoming a nuclear power, made his political rise a meteoric one. It eventually carried him to the highest levels of his

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country's leadership, where he was responsible for the program that rebuilt Japan's population by encouraging couples to invest in the future by having more babies. He, Asami, and their three children remained both friends and business associates of the Gores, and visited them regularly.

When Frank and Samantha said they were retiring, they meant it. Neither of them left the new states more than two or three times a year, and that was only to visit friends for a day or two, attend the annual Irregulars' reunions, or give a rare commencement speech. The couple very occasionally gave interviews, but steadfastly refused to publicly discuss or comment on the politics of the day.

That's not to say they were hermits. They were both a regular sight on the beaches and in the clubs along both the Gulf and the Sea of Cortez; they both liked to swim, surf, sail, fish and dance. The locals quickly got to know them and greet them with a wave or a handshake, but they also took care of their famous residents. Although they made sure the Gores never noticed, the local people were quick to warn the tourists in their midst not to "bother the General or his Missus" in no uncertain terms, and that anything beyond a friendly wave or "Hello, sir," was likely to bring serious consequences, often as not in the form of a private ass-kicking once Frank and Samantha were out of sight and couldn't object. They loved them for more than their fame and accomplishments; they loved them for their humility as well. It wasn't at all unusual to see the former President helping to push someone's car out of a ditch or be up to his elbows in grease helping a neighbor fix a tractor, or for his wife to show up at someone's house with a homemade pie and some sincere sympathy for a death in the family, and, when there was volunteer work to be done, it was a given they'd be there. They contributed to the community in other ways too; Samantha taught a much-sought after journalism class at the local university, while Frank coached martial arts and combat shooting for the militia and the ROTC Unit at the community school, as well as giving leadership seminars at both, and was the assistant coach of the local youth rugby team.

Their farm was a real one; they worked on raising and improving the yields and flavor of various fruits and vegetables, as well as breeding riding horses and bulldogs. Thumper, the scarred, grizzled old warrior, was voted unanimously by the first elected Congress as the official symbol of the Confederate States of America. The loyal animal was the only dog to receive a state funeral, and his own marble statue and tomb in Richmond, in front of the Capital where he could forever guard the steps. He had finally died in his sleep one night lying on the bed at Frank and Samantha's feet, dreaming pleasant dreams of combat and coyotes, but he left behind a legacy. They had bred him to the finest American Bulldog and Pit Bull lines, and carefully selected only those pups who shared their sire's temperament, size and courage. The resulting dogs were Thumper's descendants, and the Gore Bulldogs became the most expensive and sought-after breed in the world.

The Gore children, Tommy, Johnny, Donna, and Kerrie, the latter born a year after Frank left office, grew up under their parents' firm but loving hands. At times it seemed as if they were human whirlwinds, violent engines of destruction bent on overturning everything in their path, but they generally kept their high spirits in check when their parents were around because Frank had been known for occasionally finding another use for his belt besides holding up his pants. Still, they were widely noted for their good behavior in public or around company, which, as Samantha observed, was at least something.

Frank made millions every year, but, while he kept close track of them, he left most of his outside business interests and investments to the management of others, as long as they were profitable, even though he sat as an honorary (and well-paid) member of the Board of Directors of more than a dozen separate companies. His only stipulation for doing so was that those companies walk the straight and narrow, and treat their customers and employees fairly, and they did; no one wanted to test the economic consequences of the Confederate hero's promise to sever all ties with them and issue a public statement as to why. Still more money rolled in from Samantha's memoir, A SOUTHERN LIFE. It was an instant worldwide best seller and added tens of millions more dollars to the already considerable family fortune.

Frank was under pressure from many quarters to do the same, but it was years before he got his own story completed. It seemed that, every time he sat down to write, something came up. His ranch manager would want him to deal with the jaguar that had taken another foal over near the western edge of the farm, or the Johnsons or Van Hausers would invite them to a barbecue. If not that, then old Colonel Van Hoot

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would swing by wanting him to go hunting or fishing, or Sam or Billy or Danny or Mike or Hodges or any of a dozen others from Dixie or elsewhere throughout the world would drop in for one of their frequent visits. Sometimes the children would want to go to the beach, and sometimes Samantha would simply want to come in and sit on his lap. Each and every time, his past was found wanting, and he suddenly had more important things to do.

~End~

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AUTHOR'S NOTES

All good things must come to an end, and THE THIRD REVOLUTION Series is no exception; in case you haven't guessed yet, you just finished the last novel. I know some of you would like it to continue because you have told me so, but I need a break, and, after all my characters have been through, they deserve one. I love them almost as if they were my own children, my own brothers and sisters, and it's time for them them to rest.

I've been told this series has changed some people's lives; I know it's certainly changed mine since I began it in 1999, and have lived with it ever since. Although I intend to keep writing, and have other projects in the works right now, this series will always be my first literary love. Even though I'll be traveling down different roads, I know I'll stop occasionally just to remember where I've been, just to shake my head and think of those Grateful Dead lyrics:

What a long, strange trip it's been!

Gregory Kay, 2011

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