

TUMULTUS

The background of the entire page is a deep blue gradient. In the center, a bright, glowing cross shape is visible, with light rays emanating from its center. A person is shown in silhouette, walking away from the viewer towards the cross. The person is wearing a short-sleeved shirt and pants, and appears to have some equipment or a bag. The overall atmosphere is one of hope, journey, or spiritual quest.

D.W. ULSTERMAN

contents

[Dedication](#)

[PROLOGUE: September, 2039](#)

[I.](#)

[II.](#)

[III.](#)

[IV.](#)

[V.](#)

[VI.](#)

[VII.](#)

[VIII.](#)

[IX.](#)

[X.](#)

[XI.](#)

[XII.](#)

[XIII.](#)

XIV.

XV.

XVI.

XVII.

XVIII.

XIX.

XIX.

XX.

XXI.

XXII.

XXIII.

XXIV.

XXV.

XXVI.

XXVII.

XXVIII.

XXIX.

XXX.

XXXI.

XXXII.

XXXIII.

XXXIV.

XXXV.

XXXVI.

XXXVII.

XXXVIII.

XXXIX.

XL.

XLI.

XLII.

XLIII.

XLIV.

XLV.

XLVI.

XLVII.

XLVIII.

XLIX.

L.

LI.

LII.

LIII.

LIV.

LV. Three Days Later...

other novels

Tumultus

Ulsterman, D.W.
(2013)

TUMULTUS

Sequel to DOMINATUS

By D.W. Ulsterman

2013

**Other titles available from
D.W. Ulsterman:**

-DOMINATUS

-MAC WALKER'S BENGHAZI:

BOOK ONE

-MAC WALKER'S BENGHAZI:

BOOK TWO

-MAC WALKER'S BENGHAZI:

BOOK THREE

-MAC WALKER'S BENGHAZI: The
Complete Collection

-MAC WALKER'S BETRAYAL:

BOOK ONE

-MAC WALKER'S BETRAYAL:

BOOK TWO

-MAC WALKER'S BETRAYAL:

BOOK THREE

**Dedicated to my son and daughter in
the hopes theirs is to be a world
embracing the principles of
responsible opportunity, liberty, and
freedom.**

And to my mother – gone too soon...

**“When dictatorship is a fact
– revolution becomes a
right.”**

-Victor Hugo

PROLOGUE:

September, 2039

Following the successful defense of Dominatus two years earlier, the ten thousand strong who had arrived in support of that tiny Alaskan community grew in numbers in the days and weeks following that conflict until finally, a massive, marching crowd of over thirty

thousand Alaskans took to the streets of Fairbanks demanding full autonomy from the mandates of the New United Nations.

Mackenzie Walker, the then seventy-three year old former Navy SEAL who had for nearly twenty years called Dominatus his home, working diligently to protect both it and its residents, led what became known as the bloodless revolution of Fairbanks Alaska. A surprising number of local authorities took up the cause of the freedom fighters, throwing down their New United Nations positions and instead joining friends and neighbors in the attempt to remove the yoke of oppression that was

life under the global mandates. Those who wished to remain loyal to the New United Nations were allowed the opportunity to leave Fairbanks.

Only a very few chose to do so.

Within days, Fairbanks Alaska was once again a place of freedom – a city whose officials quickly took oaths in support of the Constitution of the former United States of America. This declaration was then followed in other areas of Alaska until, within just a few more months, even Anchorage and finally Juneau, embraced the rising tide of liberty.

Alaska declared itself free from the New

United Nations.

Stories of how the citizens of Alaska took back their home state spread quickly, despite aggressive attempts by N.U.N. authorities to block communications regarding the successful revolution. Similar uprisings soon followed in and around Great Falls, Montana, Preston, Idaho, and Rock Springs, Wyoming. These in turn were mirrored in other locations across the former United States, though as the numbers of uprisings grew, so too did the increasingly violent response from the New United Nations authorities. After a three day standoff between nearly two thousand freedom fighters

and one hundred N.U.N. compliance officers just outside Carson City, Nevada, a series of drone bombings were initiated that left thousands dead and injured, and thousands more unwilling to continue the fight for fear of receiving a similar fate. While freedom and liberty were winning the hearts and minds of the revolution, the New United Nations continued to dominate the skies with its vast and deadly drone capabilities.

And yet, still more pockets of resistance sprung up across the Lower 48. Initially, this resistance was disjointed, sometimes unsuccessful, but slowly, as months turned to years, it grew in both numbers and strength. Reese Neeson, himself a Dominatus survivor, continued his

series of short wave radio programs, transmitting a message of hope that if more would be willing to stand against the tyranny of the New United Nations, yet more would join that cause, and freedom and liberty would soon follow.

The drone bombings were increased. Fort Collins, Colorado was witness to nearly twelve thousand murdered by the drones. Yuma, Arizona saw another seven thousand freedom fighters slain. And in Stockton, California, home to the largest New United Nations re-education facility in America, over twenty thousand men, women, and children were dumped into what was a massive and horrific incineration device. The

victims' ashen smoke remnants hung over Stockton like a morbid, low hanging cloud for days after. It was this heinous act in California that successfully stalled what the Old Man of Dominatus had hoped for just two years earlier – the Second American Revolution. People once again grew fearful of opposing the tyranny of the New United Nations.

Still, freedom fighters throughout what was once America pressed on, refusing to give up. Just three weeks following the inhumanity of what was by then being called the Stockton Massacre, word arrived from the newly reformed Texas Resistance – a group of nearly fifty

thousand freedom fighters who were preparing to do in Texas what had been done in Alaska – win back their freedom. Not only in their own state of Texas, but throughout all of the former United States, and the world. The leader of the Texas Resistance sent a secret message to the survivors of Dominatus, hoping to secure their aid in obtaining a rumored weapon residing in the desolate outpost of Churchill, Manitoba. This weapon was said to have the potential of decimating the drone empire of the New United Nations, a weapon currently under the protection of a mysterious priest.

“Please secure weapon and transport

safely to location in Texas. Priest is expecting your arrival. More details there. Without your help, the revolution will likely fail. We intend to bring back freedom to Texas and America and then the world. Where you have already led, and where we now hope to lead, others will follow. To do so, we must have that weapon. Make way to Churchill, Manitoba as quickly as possible.

Beware Seekers.”

-Royce Calhoun / Texas Resistance

I.

Mac despised hospitals. Hated the smell. The lighting. The sense of impending sickness and death.

Throughout his seventy five years, he had managed to avoid them with but very few exceptions.

Unfortunately, today was one of those

exceptions.

A few months after the defense of Dominatus, he had felt the occasional shot of pain from deep in his chest when taking a breath. Initially, these moments were far and few between, but over the last year, he noted them coming much more regularly until finally, they were waking him up at night.

These pains were now accompanied by a cough that would worsen, and then improve, but never entirely go away. It was Dr. Lester Miller, another Dominatus survivor, who when noting Mac's cough two weeks ago during a dinner with other former residents of

Dominatus, requested the former Navy SEAL stop by the medical clinic he had recently started in Juneau.

Mac had insisted his cough was nothing, but Dr. Miller persisted to the point of begging Mac to stop by. Something in Mac knew the doctor was right – his dislike of hospitals be damned.

His initial visit to the clinic was three days ago. Dr. Miller listened intently to his breathing, took all forms of fluid samples, and finally, multiple chest x-rays. The doctor told Mac to come back at the end of the week to go over the results of the initial examination.

And so, there sat Mackenzie Walker atop an examination table inside a small room awaiting the return of his old friend and personal physician. His cough actually seemed to have improved in recent days – only flaring up a few times a day. The pain inside his chest was still felt from time to time, though even that seemed to have diminished somewhat.

The door to the examination room opened.

“Mac, how are you feeling today?”

Dr. Lester Miller was now in his late 60’s, a man born from poverty who had

worked his way through college to eventually become one of the most prominent kidney specialists in the United States – a Nobel Prize winner in medicine. Soon after emerging as one of the most influential opponents of the federal government’s takeover of healthcare though, he found himself stripped of his medical license, and banished from the profession. The doctor had described it to Reese Neeson during their interview over two years ago in Dominatus by simply saying, “Everything changed in this country after Obamacare.”

Mac shrugged as Dr. Miller sat in a small chair placed in the corner of the

examination room.

“Well...I guess that depends on what you have to tell me Doc. And don't bullshit me, ok? None of that soft landing crap. Let me hear it.”

Dr. Miller folded his hand on his lap, a small smile creeping across his dark skinned face.

“I know Mac. I wouldn't try that with you.”

Mac straightened up and looked the doctor in the eye, holding his gaze there for several seconds.

“Good – then get to it. I figure I’m dying...just a matter of how soon, right?”

Dr. Miller nodded.

“Yes Mac, it’s not good. I ran the tests, looked over the imaging, re-ran the tests, and sent the results out to a retired oncologist in Fairbanks who confirmed what I thought. There’s no doubt.”

Mac’s head tilted slightly to his right as his brow furrowed, deepening the lines on his forehead.

“Oncologist? That would be...cancer?”

“Yes Mac, cancer. It’s in your lungs. Both lungs. Spreading up the lining of your trachea.”

“And we can’t get it out? Inoperable?”

Again Dr. Miller nodded.

“Inoperable. It’s spread too far. We can possibly slow its progress some. But even that...I don’t know. This isn’t my particular field of specialty.”

Mac grew momentarily silent, his eyes glancing down at the floor. Dr. Miller sat silent as well, knowing Mac was digesting the death sentence he had just been given. Finally Mac raised his

head.

“How did it...don’t see cancer much these days. Not since the vaccine. Was it...was it the smoke? The bar?”

Dr. Miller rose from his seat and walked toward Mac, shaking his head.

“No, it wasn’t that. You’re right Mac, cancer is a rare occurrence. Has been for some time now. But, it does still happen. Do you recall Reese’s story about his father, how he died from cancer? How the specialist called it a one-in-a-million form of the disease resistant to the vaccine?”

“Yeah, Reese was suspicious of that. Thought that his dad was...was basically poisoned. Injected or whatever.”

The doctor again nodded to Mac.

“That’s right. I had heard of such things, rumors of it...going back thirty years or so. That there was a government sponsored program for that type of thing – but I had never seen it confirmed. Never had a patient to confirm that such a program actually existed.”

Another prolonged silence placed itself in the small examination room as Mac’s eyes again locked with Dr. Miller’s.

“Until now.”

Dr. Miller's right hand place itself on Mac's left shoulder and squeezed it softly, a look of powerless regret showing itself for the first time.

“That's right Mac – what is in your lungs right now. It was put there. That cancer is a manufactured product. I suspected it and the oncologist confirmed it. That's no regular cancer. It's something else. Raise your shirt up Mac and look just under your right arm pit.”

Mac followed the doctor's directions, looking down at what appeared to be a

tiny red-tinted mole at the top of his rib cage. The same mole Dr. Miller had scraped some skin off of during the initial examination three days ago.

“Yeah – that little thing? What about it?”

“That was the entrance point. That was how the manufactured virus was introduced. Two years ago. That’s my guess – two years ago.”

Confusion spread across Mac’s face.

“Two years...what? How?”

Dr. Miller left the question unanswered,

knowing the realization would soon come to Mac – a realization that was uttered in a single word.

“Hess.”

August Hess had been the New United Nations Special Operations officer who had come to Dominatus with the intent of destroying both it and its inhabitants. He had failed, but it now appeared he had managed to leave a deadly and quite personal reminder of that conflict inside the body of Mackenzie Walker.

The doctor folded his arms as he stood in front of Mac, his head shaking slowly from side to side.

“When you two tangled that first day Officer Hess arrived at Dominatus. I’m certain that’s when it happened. Just a quick jab – you wouldn’t even have felt it during the confrontation. In and out and left unnoticed since then. The cancer was injected, took root in your lungs...and now...it’s killing you Mac. It’s killing you and there’s nothing I can do to stop it. Nothing anyone can do. Even if we had a full ration of the cancer vaccine...this form...this manufactured form, is resistant. It’s meant to be resistant. I’m so sorry Mac.”

Mac brushed Dr. Miller’s sympathy aside with a wave of his right hand.

“Stop right there Doc – none of that shit. Look, I’ve been living well past my expiration date for a long time now. A long-long time. And Hess...son-of-a-bitch has been dead and gone for two years now and here he is ringing me up all over again. Tenacious evil piece of shit that he was.”

Mac looked down again for a brief moment and then chuckled.

“Ok then, time is short and I’ve got things to do. We’re meeting up tonight about the trip east. Going to see that priest, see about the weapon they’ve been saying he’s got to bring down the

New United Nations.”

Dr. Miller’s eyes widened in alarm.

“Oh Mac – no. I don’t believe that is possible for you now. That kind of trip...in your condition? I’m sorry Mac, but that is just not practical.”

Mac hopped off the examination table and gave his friend a warm smile.

“Well Doc, it’s not your call now is it? Take off the doctor hat for a moment here, ok? I’m not dead yet. Won’t be tomorrow. We defended Dominatus. We took back Alaska. There are people in the Lower 48 willing to fight back

against the globalists, right? And they're looking for those of us who've done it already to help them out with that fight. I intend to do just that. Whatever time I got left Doc – I'll be doing it fighting. It'll be kicking down the door of the New United Nations. That's how I'm going out. I won't be sitting around here waiting to die. You know me better than that."

The doctor shook his head again, putting both his hands on Mac's shoulders.

"Mac, your condition could worsen very quickly. I truly have no idea if it's a matter of weeks or months...or what. I do know you won't be getting better, and

the stress of that kind of trip will likely exacerbate your condition considerably. Even if you were healthy – you're a seventy five year old man. You can't do this kind of thing anymore."

Mac's hand shot up in front of Dr. Miller's face, his pointing finger extended upward.

"Watch me. I ain't dyin' just yet Doc. And I'm taking this trip. I'm getting them to that priest. To that weapon. If it's the last thing I ever do – well then let's get to it. And as far as my condition...the fucking cancer? You keep your mouth shut Doc. Ok?"

“I won’t say anything Mac. I wouldn’t compromise doctor-patient privilege. But I have to say in the strongest terms – you are in no condition to make any kind of trip.”

Mac’s features softened, knowing his friend was simply trying to protect him in the only way his own experiences as a physician would have him do.

“You’ve been a good friend for a long time Lester. I’ve had a hell of a good run. Better than I deserved. If I can get just one more mission in before it’s all done...I wouldn’t ask for more than that. And if I can do just a little more to give some hope of liberty and freedom

to others, this old man will die happy. You take care of yourself Doc.”

Mac extended his hand toward Dr. Miller, who then received it into his own.

“You too Mac. You too. Thank you for everything you did for us all those years in Dominatus. You helped protect a lot of people for a long time. Right to the end. You’re an honorable man, Mac, and I’ve been blessed to know you.”

Mac snorted at the doctor’s words.

“Blessed? Shit Doc, blessings got nothing to do with it. I’ve no use for

God. Don't believe in him.”

Dr. Lester Miller lowered his head slightly as he looked at his friend, his voice whispering an affectionate response.

“That's ok Mac – He believes in you.”

II.

The conference room inside what used to be the Bank of Juneau building, housed a long table where former residents of Dominatus and current members of the Alaskan militia now sat.

From Dominatus were Mac, Reese Neeson, Dublin Meyer, and Walter Tedlow, known more commonly as Bear.

Across the table from them sat forty-six year old Franklin Thomas, unofficial leader of the Alaskan Militia. He had helped organize the ten thousand who marched in defense of Dominatus two years ago. A former long haul truck driver who had in his 20's served eight years in the United States Navy, Thomas now found himself speaking on behalf of the thousands who were now active members of the Alaskan Militia – a group whose example was now being followed by other freedom fighters

across the former United States of America.

To the left of Franklin Thomas was Sally Emerich, liaison to the recently elected mayor of Juneau who many were already pushing to be the next Alaskan governor. She was a tall, dark haired woman in her mid-30's who, despite her relatively young age, appeared quite comfortable sitting among this rag-tag group of newly emerged revolutionaries.

On the other side of Thomas sat Cooper Wyse, a man long called by those who knew him as simply Coop. A highly regarded horse trainer who the locals had for years affectionately called the

“Irish Cowboy”, his family had come to Alaska from Ireland two generations ago. The fifty year old Cooper resided on a sprawling ranch some ten miles outside Juneau. True to the description of being a man of very few words, Coop sat motionless at the table, his eyes fixated downward at his folded and heavily calloused hands in front of him.

Franklin Thomas was the first to initiate the conversation between the eclectic group gathered around the conference room table, stroking his salt and pepper beard as he gathered his thoughts in advance of his words.

“So, you folks intend to make your way

across Canada to meet up with this priest? Do I have that right?”

Mac’s voice cut across the table in response.

“That’s exactly right. If there’s a weapon there that can help bring down the New United Nations, and they need our help to get it to the Texas Resistance, then that’s what we’ll do – or die tryin’.”

Sally Emerich cleared her throat.

“You are aware that is a journey of well over a thousand miles Mr. Walker? From Juneau to Churchill Manitoba, that

is quite a trip. And with all due respect, a man your age...”

Sally’s statement trailed off, leaving Mac to stare back at her with cold indifference.

“Actually Ms. Emerich, it’s over two thousand miles give or take. As for my age, need I remind you it was me, along with some others, who helped free up this same city you are now helping to run with that newly elected boss of yours? So don’t you go worrying yourself over how old I am – thank you very much.”

Sally couldn’t help but smile at the older man’s determination.

“My apologies Mr. Walker. I certainly didn’t mean to offend you. And I am also very aware and grateful for what you’ve done to help free Alaska from the New United Nations. It’s just that resources are rather limited, and the threat of a counter attack by N.U.N. forces remains a serious consideration that we have to prepare for. So, this trip of yours, we have to weigh potential benefit against known cost.”

Reese Neeson leaned forward, his eyes glancing from Mac and then to Sally Emerich as he did so.

“I don’t see a whole lot of cost involved

with this Ms. Emerich. Just help us get across the border, some supplies, ammunition, and we'll take it from there."

Sally Emerich gave another brief smile while shaking her head.

"Actually it's a lot more complicated than that Mr. Neeson. You want ammunition, right? We need to keep as much of that here as possible. We don't have an unlimited supply. Far from it. You want us to help you get into Canada. Now while Canada is something of a New United Nations free zone, each of the territories is a bit different from each other and there's not

nearly the compliance presence as we have had in the United States – the former United States, if we start sending people from here to there it could raise concerns in the Lower 48 and give them enough motivation to attempt an attack on us. An attack that we are simply unprepared for right now.”

Reese quickly answered back.

“That’s exactly the point Ms. Emerich. We’re attempting to secure a weapon that will remove that fear and break apart the New United Nations. Return the United States to its own people just like we’ve done in Alaska. That reward far outweighs the risk, or the resources

involved, don't you think?"

"I'm not here to prevent your mission Mr. Neeson. I'm here to make certain it is a mission that offers justifiable risk in relation to justifiable resources."

Bear's hand crashed down onto the table, causing everyone but Mac to jump backward in their seats.

"Now what the hell does all that even mean? Justifiable this and justifiable that? Look lady, you can take all that kind of talk and shove it up your uptight ass. If we want to head out to Manitoba then that's what we will do. You got no say in the matter. We didn't fight for

freedom up here just so some government bureaucrat can tell us how to use that freedom. That's exactly the kind of thing I thought we were all fighting against!"

Sally Emerich remained undeterred from voicing her concerns.

"I assure you we are all on the same side here Mr. Tedlow. That said, we each have a responsibility to everyone else. If we aren't very careful in how we proceed, all of what you helped fight for could be lost, and lost rather quickly."

Mac hissed a brief response.

“Lady – it looks like it’s been lost already.”

Franklin Thomas attempted to intervene between the former residents of Dominatus and the representative from the newly reformed Juneau mayor’s office.

“Uh...look, I’m all for helping locate a weapon that can defeat the globalists. Want to make that very clear here. I also, uh, understand what Ms. Emerich is trying to say. I’m not much of a politician. For some reason, people seem to think I’m somewhat of a better soldier. Hell, never thought of myself much of anything to tell you all the truth.

I do have a question for you Mac on this. Now I have to think a guy like you, all your experience with this kind of stuff, that this whole thing could be some kind of trap. That has to have crossed your mind – right?”

Sally Emerich nodded in agreement.

“Exactly.”

Mac gave a brief smile, before shrugging, coughing briefly as he did so.

“Sure – maybe it’s a trap. Maybe not. We don’t know for sure until we get there. If it is a trap, then getting across the border won’t be a problem because

that's what the compliance officers or whoever will want, right? If it's not a trap, then it sure as hell is worth the risk. Without question. So either way, I'm making the trip, and there's not a damn thing any of you can do to change that fact. And I'm thinking my friends here are probably feeling the same way I am on that."

Dublin spoke up for the first time.

"I'm with Mac on this. If there really is a weapon, we have to try and get it to the Texas Resistance. Reese has been in communication with them and I have no reason to believe they're lying. We can't just stay up here hoping they will

leave us alone. We tried that already in Dominatus. Eventually the New United Nations will be back. The drones will be back. We have to keep fighting. We have to help out all of those people in the Lower 48 who are finally taking a stand. This is our time. It's what my grandfather would have wanted. It's what he said is happening – a second American Revolution.”

Silence descended upon the conference room as both sides stared back at each other before Franklin Thomas attempted to restart the conversation.

“I won't do anything to try and stop any of you from taking on this mission. Do I

think it's a wise move? That's another thing, but it's your call. At least from where I'm sitting, you're free to do what you want with this. I'll supply you with some weapons and ammunition...some supplies. No men though. I can't afford to do that. We are preparing our defenses and I can't have people running off on every hair-brained plan that comes their way."

Sally Emerich again shook her head in protest.

"No. Speaking on behalf of the mayor, this plan is unwise. It is a waste of resources. Resources we desperately need at this time. The risk of getting

across the border, that alone makes this utterly foolish and potentially very dangerous. It would be an act of provocation. You mentioned the drones Ms. Meyer, and you're right to do so. By attempting to sneak across the border, that's exactly what you could be bringing down on all of us here. Now if I had assurances you could cross the border without being seen, that would be different – but I don't think you could make that assurance now could you? Not honestly anyways.”

Mac's voice rose in unmistakable anger, his eyes flashing his own approaching storm.

“You know damn well the security on the border between here and the province is less than half what it used to be. The New United Nations has its hands full in the Lower 48. They don’t got time to be botherin’ with us right now. So your little suggestion there is total and complete bullshit from the get-go. That entire area of Canada is almost wide open. We just avoid the urban areas and we’ll be fine. And if we ain’t fine, then so be it. This is a war we got going on here right now lady. You get that? A fucking war. This ain’t no time to be politicking. This is a time for every one of us to fight and fight hard. That’s what we are doing with this trip. Is it crazy? Sure. Am I a tired old man

who should know better? Hell, they've been telling me that for as long as you've been dressing yourself. We're going across that border. We're making this trip. Franklin just said he's stepping back from it. He ain't giving his blessing, but he ain't going to try and stop us either. That leaves you Ms. Emerich – you and your mayor's office. You really think you can do anything about this one way or the other? C'mon now young lady...you best get wise here real quick."

Sally Emerich began to protest Mac's insistence, but was cut off by the slow and deliberate words of Cooper Wyse, his voice a barely audible, deep low

whisper that somehow managed to drown out the higher-pitched pleas of the mayor's office representative.

“I’ll get ‘em across. No worries there. Got horses. Guns. Mac’s right. Can’t be sitting around waiting for the globalists to come back. And they will be coming back. We all know that.”

Sally’s voice rose even higher, attempting to dissuade Cooper from participating.

“No Mr. Wyse, the risk to our community here is just too great. While I’m sure you know that area well, it’s too dangerous.”

Cooper Wyse slowly rose from his chair, rising to his full height of just over six feet, looking directly into the eyes of Sally Emerich.

“Ma’am, I’m done talking here. My mind is made up. If these folks want my help crossing the border, then that’s what I’m doing. I was invited by Mac to this meeting here – he told me I could listen in and decide for myself if I wanted to be involved in this trip they’re taking. I’ve decided.

Mac – I’ll be waiting at my place. You know the way. Soon as you’re ready, we can be off.”

Cooper Wyse walked out of the conference room.

Mac and the others rose from their seats as well, looking down at Sally Emerich, who in turn glanced over at Franklin Thomas for support that did not materialize.

“Ms. Emerich, if these people want to chase some hope of a weapon to fight back against the New United Nations, I’m not stopping them. And without me, you or the mayor can’t stop them. If they have Coop helping them across the border, that’s about as good a chance as anyone can have at doing it without

being seen. So...just let this one go.”

Sally Emerich looked at each of the Dominatus survivors who stood across the table from her, before finally sighing in resignation.

“Fine. Go off and get yourselves killed. Put our city at risk. If you think it’s worth it and I can’t convince you otherwise, and Mr. Thomas and his militia won’t prevent you from doing so...then Mr. Thomas is right. The mayor’s office doesn’t have the power to stop you.”

Mac smiled broadly while winking at Sally, extending both of his arms

outward on either side of him.

“Well now why didn’t you just come out and say that in the first place and save all of us poor folk here the trouble of sitting around this stupid table?”

Sally Emerich did not appear amused.

Franklin shook the hands of the Dominatus residents and wished them luck, before stopping in front of Mackenzie Walker.

“You’re not getting any younger Mac. This kind of trip...you sure you really want to attempt it? We can send someone else in your place. Keep you

here – we could use you. What you know. You’d still be of value to us around here.”

Mac leaned into the left ear of the Alaskan Militia leader and whispered his response.

“Kiss my ass Franklin. This old man is off to save the world.”

III.

Cooper left Mac with instructions on how to get to his ranch, with the one demand that they walk the nearly ten

miles there. The next day, Reese, Dublin, Mac, and Bear gathered outside the Juneau hotel they had been staying at the last few days. It was an unusually warm Alaska morning considering November was just a few weeks away.

Bear's wife Clancy was outside the hotel entrance as well, along with their two children. So too was Lucille Wagner, Mac's longtime companion from their years in Dominatus. The others were already aware of Lucille's repeated refusal to allow Mac to make the journey across the Canadian provinces to the far off outpost of Churchill, Manitoba. That refusal continued to express itself to Mac as he

stood silently with his arms folded across his chest listening to Lucille's increasingly agitated tone.

“Stupid old man is what you are Mackenzie Walker. Stubborn and stupid. Going off to get yourself killed. Trying to prove yourself all over again? Is that it? You don't need to do this stuff anymore Mac. Those days are over. You need to stay right here and help out where you're needed, not go on some wild, idiotic trip to God knows where. Not at your age. Not...not with me here. Leaving me behind to do what Mac? Sit around and worry? We survived Dominatus together. Can't we just enjoy whatever time we have left

with each other?”

Mac glanced down for a moment before his eyes returned Lucille's hopeful gaze. While her words were angry, her eyes held fear – fear for the safety of the man she had come to love very much. Lucille's long, grey-streaked hair was held back by a simple red ribbon, and her lean face, while deeply lined around the eyes and mouth, still held the simple beauty she had admired with just a hint of pride decades earlier.

The two had known each other for nearly twenty years, and it was Lucille, as much as anyone, who had reminded Mac of his own humanity and dignity after

years spent killing for the United States government, the same government that later attempted to silence him within the walls of a federal prison following his killing of a man in self-defense.

“Lucille, you know me better than anyone. So that said, you know I can’t turn my back on this mission. These people need me. As old and tired as I am, if I’m needed, then that’s where I’m gonna go. That’s the man you know. That’s the man I am. I can’t change that woman...can’t be something I’m not. I had no plans to grow old gracefully, and I’ll be damned if I start now.”

Reese spotted Bear trying not to smile,

the former NFL player's own wife Clancy giving him the same disapproving look as Lucille was giving Mac.

Lucille's gaze went from Mac to Dublin, hoping she would offer some support in keeping Mac from leaving the newfound and relative safety of Alaska for the unknown and likely far more dangerous lands beyond, where the reach of the New United Nations remained a daily and deadly threat to its enemies.

"Dublin, you know what it is to lose someone you love. Your grandfather... we all miss him. Please tell Mac he's not needed. Tell him to stay here with

me. Where he belongs.”

Dublin looked at Mac, and then back to Lucille, her dark eyes already indicating to the older woman she would not offer her what she hoped to hear.

“Lucille, if there’s one thing I know about Mac, is that he is and has always been his own man. It’s a big part of why we admire him so much. I’ll support him in whatever he chooses. Whether he stays or goes. And the fact is, we can always use his help. There’s not another person I would want fighting more on my side than Mac Walker.

Lucille glared back at Dublin, her mouth

curling into a snarl.

“Stupid girl! You think you have all your life ahead of you. You and Reese, you think it can’t be taken away like that? Going on this trip of yours, it’s just stupid. Dangerous and stupid. All of you. All of you should know better. What about you Bear? You have a wife. Kids. Why in the hell are you going?”

Bear had his massive right arm around the shoulder of Clancy, while his left hand was being held by both his children.

“Lucille, those are exactly the reasons

I'm going. We ain't safe here. You know that. It'll be sooner not later when the drones are back. The New United Nations officers – you really think they'll just leave us all alone up here. For how long? A few more months? A year? Maybe a few years at most? And what then? What if that's when they take my wife and my kids? What if I had a chance to stop all that? To fight back. To protect my family's future. I know you're afraid for Mac, Lucille. You should be. We should all be afraid for every one of us. So I'm doing what I always do. Putting my head down and smashing across the line. I'm going for the win. I want to stop the New United Nations for good, and if there's some

weapon out there that can do that, then I'll do whatever I can to make that happen."

"Are you willing to die Bear? That's what will happen. You will go out there and die and leave your wife and kids here, all alone."

It was Clancy and not her husband who responded to Lucille's words, her pretty, girl-next-door features flashing a warning that Lucille had gone too far.

"That's enough Lucille. You're scaring my kids. And we won't be alone. We are all in this thing together. All of us. You included."

Lucille's face was overcome with guilt as she saw Bear and Clancy's children beginning to cry. This in turn led to Lucille's own tears running down her cheeks.

Mac's eyes looked to the sunlit sky above them.

“Awww, hell. C'mon now Lucille, none of that. I'm gonna be fine. You know me...toughest son-of-a-bitch you ever met. That's what you call me. And that's what I am. I can still throw down when the need is there. Bear's right, they'll be coming back. And there won't be any mercy for any of us when they

do. We thought they came at us hard back in Dominatus – this time it'll be worse. A whole lot more of us will be dead. There could be a hundred drones flying over our heads any day now. We don't have the defenses to stop that kind of attack. Not yet. My gut tells me we won't either. Not before it's too late. So honey, I got to do this. I got to try. It's all I know how to do. It's....it's what I need to do.”

Lucille wiped yet more tears from her face as she looked into the face of Mac.

“I still say you're a stubborn old fool Mackenzie Walker.”

Mac smiled, and shrugged his shoulders.

“You won’t get an argument from me on that one Lucille. Can’t believe you’ve put up with me for this long.”

Lucille put her arms around Mac and squeezed him tightly, kissing his neck before whispering into his left ear.

“I’m going to wait right here for you Mac. You come back to me. Please... do what you say you have to do, and then you come back to me. Promise?”

“Mac gently took Lucille’s face into his hands and kissed her lips.

“I promise, I’ll do everything I can to make sure you and me ain’t done with each other just yet.”

Mac felt a pang of guilt as he said the words, knowing it would be very difficult to prove them right to Lucille.

Bear took both of his children into his arms and hugged them, his eyes shut tight as he did so. He then stood and silently held Clancy, whose body shook with her own sobs. Dublin took Reese’s right hand and squeezed it tightly, grateful in knowing she would be sharing this journey with the man she had come to call her friend and lover.

Finally, the group of four former residents of Dominatus began walking down the road that led to the eastern outskirts of Juneau and eventually led to the Wyse farm. Bear looked back several times to waive goodbye. Mac did not – he looked straight ahead, his jaw set with determination.

The journey to the priest and the hopeful weapon of the New United Nations' destruction had begun.

IV.

It took much of the day for the four to

reach the beginning of the long drive that marked the entrance to Cooper Wyse's property. A single hand made sign nailed to the side of a fence post that simply read **W Y S E** was the only welcome they received.

The hours of walking had taken a toll on Mac, though he had said nothing in complaint, he was unable to mask his increasingly labored breathing, and as morning turned to afternoon, his steps grew noticeably slower. He stopped in front of the sign and placed both of his arms over the top rail of the fence, leaning on it for support.

“I still don't know why in the hell he

made us walk all the way out here. Got my ass dragging, that's for damn sure."

Bear stood next to Mac and clapped him on the shoulder.

"For what it's worth, I'm more than a little tired myself Mac. If I didn't know better, I'd say this Cooper was testing us to make sure we were up for the trip."

Dublin was staring down the long narrow drive, a smile spreading across her face.

"This is a beautiful place Reese. The trees, grasses – it all looks and smells so amazing."

Reese, who had spent most of his life in more urban areas, found the vast open space of the Wyse ranch somewhat overwhelming.

“A nice place to visit Dublin, but I don’t know if I would want to live way out here. It seems so...solitary.”

Dublin shook her head at Reese.

“City boy.”

Mac interrupted the conversation by walking past both of them as he made his way down the drive with a slight limp, covering his mouth as he coughed

several times.

“Let’s go. Want to get to Coop before we run out of daylight.”

The fenced road to the Wyse ranch house was nearly a mile long. Halfway to the house a group of five horses running in the vast fenced field stopped and came up to them, the largest of the horses looking at them cautiously. They were beautiful animals – powerful and graceful, with clear intelligent eyes that seemed to question who these unknown visitors were who now walked the property that was their home.

Finally the ranch house came into view,

a long single story structure with a covered porch that ran the length of the front of the home. On that porch could be seen Cooper Wyse, occupying what appeared to be a handmade rocking chair, the brim of his cowboy hat tilted downward just above his green eyes as he sat drinking from a simple white coffee cup. To Cooper's right sat a large, red-colored dog, whose own brown eyes watched the approach of the arriving four with a careful intensity. Cooper's right hand reached out to scratch the dog's ear as a way of letting it know all was well.

As the four guests stood directly in front of the covered porch, Cooper stood up

and tipped his hat in greeting.

“Hope the walk didn’t prove too much trouble for you. Since we’re not so far from the border between Alaska and the Canadian province out here, there’s regular drone surveillance just over the hills there. Anything mechanical sets them off, and I figure it would be best if we start this trip off sight unseen if possible.”

Reese was the first to take a step onto the porch.

“Bear said he figured you were testing us to see if we could handle the trip.”

Cooper gave a small smile and the slightest of shrugs.

“I won’t say that wasn’t a possibility. So tell me, you all up for the trip?”

Now Mac also stepped onto the first step of the porch.

“I’m getting tired of people asking me that question. Yeah, we’re up for the damn trip. We’re riding horses, right?”

Cooper nodded.

“That’s right, for some of the trip anyways. You ever sit in a saddle for any length of time Mr. Walker? Or you

Mr. Neeson? Bear? Dublin?”

Bear snorted, waiving a dismissive hand in Cooper’s direction.

“I played football for a living. Don’t think sitting myself on top of a horse is gonna be any harder than that. No disrespect, but seems to me the horse is doing most the work.”

Cooper lightly scratched the unshaven stubble on his left cheek as a knowing smile revealed itself to Bear.

“Talk to me in a few days about that Mr. Tedlow. I’m not a gambling man, but if I were, I’m pretty certain you’ll be singing

a different tune by then.”

Bear took a step onto the porch as he raised both his hands upward and shrugged. Cooper’s dog let out a low growl at the big man, its eyes glaring toward Bear warning him not to come any closer.

Cooper issued a sharp whistle that instantly quieted the dog, his right hand resting gently on its neck.

Dublin pointed at the dog.

“What kind of dog is that Mr. Wyse?”

Though Dublin had spoken, the dog’s

eyes remained fixed on Bear.

“He’s a red Doberman. My grandparents used to breed them years ago. His name is Brando. Last of his family...like me. He just turned seven a few months back. He’s eyeing you Mr. Tedlow because you’re the biggest one of the four of you. Figures you to be the most potential threat. He’ll come to trust you in time, but for now, I wouldn’t make any sudden gestures around him. Brando is about the smartest dog I’ve ever known, but he’s damn protective of me too. Kinda funny people call you Bear. Brando here chased one out from behind the barn just last summer. Tore into that big old bear and didn’t let up

until the poor bastard was running back up into the hills. Seems like Brando wants to do the same to you about now.”

Mac leaned down and slowly reached his hand out to pat the dog’s head. Brando sniffed his hand briefly before giving it a lick.

“Not too common a dog for Alaska. Short haired and all, must not handle the winter months too well.”

Cooper smiled down at Brando.

“Oh, he does all right. He prefers a good fire for sure, but if we have to be outside during a cold spell, he puts up

with it. Seems to like you well enough Mac.”

Mac shook his head slightly.

“Guess that makes him a piss-poor judge of character then.”

Mac stood back up and looked from one end of the covered farmhouse porch to the other, before his eyes settled back onto the still seated Cooper Wyse.

“So, we heading out first thing in the morning I suppose? You told me you had all the supplies we would need for the trip. Mind if I confirm that about now? I like to be prepared.”

Cooper stood up and pointed toward the large dilapidated barn that sat nearly a hundred yards from the ranch house. It had been painted red at one time, but only remnants of that paint remained. Most of the wood was fully exposed and weather aged a dull grey color.

“Supplies are in the barn. Like I said, everything we’ll need. And then some. C’mon, let’s go take a look then.”

The four Dominatus survivors followed behind Cooper Wyse as he made the walk to the barn structure with Brando following closely on Cooper’s right side. The barn’s entrance was a large

wooden sliding door that had single metallic lock to keep it secured. Cooper removed a key from a coat pocket and turned the locking mechanism and then slid the door open. Inside were six stables likely used to house the horses during the cold Alaskan winter. A single light above the middle of those stables offered faint illumination. On both sides of the barn large bales of hay were stacked nearly to the ceiling some twenty feet above their heads.

Mac turned to Cooper while pointing toward the six horse stables.

“Which one is the access Coop? One on the far right?

Cooper Wyse's eyes widened slightly at the question.

“Access?”

Mac gave a sly smile.

“Yeah – c'mon now, did you think someone like me wouldn't do their homework on you? That I'd spend all day making my way here without having some idea what you're about?”

Cooper remained silent, looking back at Mac without expression.

Mac walked to the stable farthest to the

right of the barn.

“The wood is hardly worn. The straw on the ground is too uniform. Hasn’t been a horse in here for a long time. Look how the wall in the back, it’s slightly different color than the other stables’ back wall. Guessing it’s a bit more substantial than the other walls, right? And notice how that one light up above isn’t actually centered above the six stables – it’s right of center. You wanted more light on that particular stable.”

Cooper Wyse again ran his fingers across the stubble on his face.

“Well Mac, I see you’re already living up to your reputation. C’mon then, let me show you what we got.”

Dublin and Reese looked at one another, silently communicating their confusion over what was just said. Bear was focused on that sixth stable, trying to figure out what Mac was seeing that remained unknown to him. The three of them followed behind Mac, who in turn was following Cooper.

Once inside the stable, Cooper Wyse brushed away some straw from the floor of the stable and then leaned down and pulled a barely noticeable rope that was colored to match the look of straw.

Instantly a panel just large enough for a man to walk through opened up in the back wall.

Mac turned to Bear, Reese, and Dublin, a wide smile breaking across his weathered face and extended his right hand toward the panel space.

“And there you have it boys and girls. Now Coop, you care to tell them what you’re all about? Seems to be a bit more than just raising some horses and hanging out with that dog.”

Cooper Wyse stood back up and folded his arms across his chest as Brando took a position to Cooper’s right.

“Sure thing Mac...I’m among friends. Right?”

Mac shrugged.

“I’d like to think so Coop.”

Cooper removed his cowboy hat and held it in both hands in front of him as he gathered his thoughts.

“This here ranch of mine has been an access point for the black market between Alaska and the provinces for... hell, been almost ten years now. Don’t do it for profit, do it to help people out. Get them supplies, medicines...things

like that. Got a few paths in the hills behind here, take a horse and cross the border into Canada and then back again. Done it hundreds of times. Know the drone patterns, their surveillance cycles. Store it up in here and then bring it into the city where they get sent off to wherever. Guessing some of the stuff made its way to Dominatus from time to time. Yoti, your Eskimo friend, he made a few requests for things over the years.”

Bear stepped forward, causing Brando to issue yet another low warning growl.

“So, you’re a smuggler. Is that it?”

Cooper placed his hat back atop his

head, pulling the brim down so it rested just above his eyes.

“Suppose that’s one way of putting it. Don’t much care what you call me. I know I’m helping people get things they need, or want, and that’s fine by me. Kept me occupied since my wife and kids, since they...since they were gone.”

Mac tipped his head in the direction of the panel.

“Can we see what you have in there? What we can take with us for the trip?”

Cooper Wyse made his way to the panel and then disappeared into it, his voice

following behind him.

“C’mon then. Let me show you what we got.”

The other four followed Cooper through the opening and then stood in complete darkness. The air was slightly cooler inside the dark space, and cleaner smelling than the musty hay and horse odors of the main barn area.

Bear’s low voice grumbled for some light.

“Can’t see a damn thing in front of me Cooper.”

Two loud hand claps followed Bear's complaint, followed by three large lights instantly turning on above their heads.

Mac gave Cooper Wyse a quizzical look, then glanced upward again at the now illuminated lights.

“What the hell was that Coop?”

Cooper gave two more claps and room was again dark. Two more claps and the light returned.

“Clap on. Clap off. My mom was crazy about this thing. Kept it in her room inside the house. She'd be in there laughing and clapping every night before

bed. I wired it up for the lighting out here when I was completing the room.”

The four Dominatus residents began to note all of the various supplies and materials that were neatly organized in the room. It was nearly twenty feet long and almost as wide, with a ceiling that appeared to be nearly ten feet high. The walls were painted a light silver color, and in the far right corner was a small air circulation unit.

Cooper’s pride in his construction was noticeable as he began to tell them the history of the hidden room.

“I made this place myself. The walls

are fully insulated, got a temperature control unit over there that keeps the room sixty five degrees 24/7. Power comes from a battery bank I keep under the floor. That battery bank is powered by the solar panels I have across the barn's roof. The New United Nations approves of solar power, but I use it to keep this room which I store all kinds of things outlawed by those bastards. Guns, ammunition, medicines, electronic devices, those little coal powered generator units I know you used up in Dominatus...all the things that people can't get anymore unless they have someone like me to help them out."

Rows of rifles were neatly hung across

the entire left wall, while individual boxes of various handguns were stored in a shelf just below that wall, and below that shelf was another shelf that contained boxes and boxes of corresponding ammunition. There were easily fifty different firearms in the room.

On the floor were four brand new coal generators as well as an entire oil extracting unit and next to that was a miniature refinery system capable of producing a hundred gallons of gasoline fuel per day. Reese spotted several handheld short wave transmission devices.

“Those transmitters – that’s top of the line and their brand new. New production which hasn’t been allowed for years. How did you get those?”

Cooper Wyse shrugged.

“Figured you would like those Reese. Thing is, there’s anything and everything out there somewhere. Just need to know how and where to look. The New United Nations has tried to wipe out the free market, but it hasn’t done it. Not yet.”

Mac was looking over the guns on the walls when his attention was diverted to something on the floor just below those

guns.

“What the hell Coop – is this what it looks like?”

Without even looking to see what Mac was referring to Cooper replied.

“Yup. Hardly used. The technology came all the way from Russia. They had a program for years developing it. Then it was defunded. At least that’s what they said. Made thousands of them which have been sold off over the years. I got that one there just a few months ago.”

Mac looked to back to Cooper Wyse, his

eyes lit up like a child's on Christmas morning.

“May I?”

Cooper nodded.

Mac carefully picked up a small rifle-like weapon that hung by itself on a four foot high rack. It looked somewhat like a toy gun, with a rather clumsy box like device that was attached to the lower portion of the barrel.

Mac let out a long slow whistle.

“Heard about these things man, had to be about thirty years ago. Old Soviet

technology. They were trying to keep up with our missile defense stuff. The Chinese did some work on this as well. A laser gun with a computerized scope. Accurate within an inch of the target up to a mile away. One clean little laser beam that can rip through a half inch of steel.”

Mackenzie Walker looked over the laser rifle more closely, his fingers running along its smooth, dull black finish.

“No serial number? Who made this? You said it was from Russia?”

Cooper shook his head.

“No, I said the technology was from Russia. That weapon there was made by a guy in Canada. Same one who made those short wave handhelds. Like I said, if enough people want something, someone else will find a way to provide it. Around here, I just happen to be that someone.”

“Does it work?”

Cooper appeared almost offended by Mac’s question.

“Yeah, works just fine. Only holds eight shots per box though. The thing they are best for, so I’m told...is against the drones. They’ve been running a bunch

of these down to the Texas Resistance. Government ain't letting the people know, but the way I hear it, the Resistance has shot at least twenty drones down with those things."

Bear grunted dismissively.

"Hell, Mac shot down that much himself up in Dominatus. Didn't you Mac?"

Mac seemed lost inside the faint metallic glow of the laser gun.

"Yeah, suppose I did."

Dublin had made her way to the back right corner of the room where a vast

array of neatly labeled and boxed fruits and vegetable seeds were stacked. She leaned down to better read the labels.

“There must be nearly a hundred different types of seeds here, and thousands and thousands of seeds. Why so many Mr. Wyse?”

“Call me Coop, everyone does. Lots of people out there wanting to start up their own food gardens. And after Alaska threw out the New United Nations, getting access to good quality seeds got a lot tougher. Government is closing down the food shipments, hoping they can starve the people back into compliance. So I’ve been doing my part

to make sure that don't happen. These packets are delivered all over the state. I heard you were something of a green thumb there Dublin – that right?"

Dublin stood back up and smiled at the compliment.

"I enjoy it, getting them started, keeping them healthy, and then harvesting and sharing with others. I had a nice greenhouse in Dominatus - I miss it."

Reese interjected.

"So, we leave tomorrow then? That's the plan?"

Mac looked up from the laser gun and nodded.

“Yeah, that’s the plan. What time you want to head out Coop?”

“I’ve been tracking the surveillance drones carefully for months now. They go in ninety minute intervals around here, right over the hills behind us. That gives us a decent window to get across the border and well into Canada without them knowing.”

Bear remained uncertain over the use of horses for the trip.

“Now explain to me again why we

aren't just shooting across the border in a vehicle? Seems like we could make the trip a whole lot faster and to be honest, I haven't done much horse riding."

Mac clapped Bear's shoulder and laughed.

"As big as your are, I feel more sorry for the horse!"

Cooper Wyse ignored Mac's joke and responded to Bear.

"Like I said, anything mechanical sets off something in the drones' surveillance system. Seen it happen more than

enough to know we don't want to risk it. I started out riding an old Yamaha 100 through a dried out riverbed to get across into Canada. Every time there'd be a drone making its way right for me within ten minutes and within another twenty minutes there'd be another two or three of those things circling the sky. First time I used a horse, nothing like that happened. Don't know if it's the sound, the exhaust emissions...whatever it is, it's just not worth it. They'll find us too fast, and we won't make it. Best chance we got of getting across without them knowing it is on horseback, same way I've been doing it for the past several years."

Mac let out a series of sharp coughs, bending over slightly as he cleared his throat.

“Sorry about that, think I might have a bit of hay fever or something.”

Dublin looked over at Reese, her eyes communicating she thought something wasn't quite right with her longtime family friend. Having spent so many years with her elderly grandfather before he finally passed, she knew the difference between a normal cough and one that hinted at something potentially more serious.

Dublin began to make her way toward

Mac but was waived off.

“Said I’m fine Dublin. Hoping to get something to eat in fact. Feels like dinner time to me. Hey now Coop, how about it? You got some grub inside that place of yours?”

Cooper Wyse’s eyes narrowed slightly as he looked Mac over before answering.

“Yeah, everyone follow me inside the house. Plenty of food and drink. Probably be a good idea to enjoy a real meal before we head out tomorrow morning. Might be the last one we get for a spell.”

V.

The interior of the Wyse home was far more luxurious and spacious than the outside indicated. The entrance hallway was covered with family photos, some of them clearly a hundred or more years old and each wall of the hallway offered two matching dark leather sofas. The home's flooring was a richly textured hard wood, similar in color to the sofas. As the hallway opened to the main room of the house, a massive river rock fireplace extended itself upwards toward the cathedral ceiling.

Like the hallway, the main room's furnishings were of the same dark leather exterior, accompanied by end tables that appeared to have been formed from tree trunks, and a massive coffee table that closely resembled the river rock fireplace with the exception of its clear, one-inch thick glass top. At one end of this room there was a well appointed kitchen with matching stainless appliances, while the other end of the room gave a glimpse of a long hallway that likely led to the home's bedrooms.

Cooper's home smelled of wood and leather, with just a hint of tobacco – a

scent that managed to be both masculine and inviting.

“So this is my family’s home. We’ve lived here for two generations. I was born in this house and God willing, I’ll die here too.”

Reese, like the others, was impressed.

“Very nice home Mr. Wyse. I assume your family built it themselves?”

Cooper Wyse nodded.

“Yes, my grandfather and grandmother did most of it. My dad did that fireplace and the flooring, and my wife, she uh...

she updated the kitchen a couple years before...before Grant County. Before I lost her. Her and the kids. That's them above the mantel."

A dozen or so photos sat atop the large wood fireplace mantel. In the middle was a much younger looking Cooper Wyse standing next to a tall and very attractive blonde haired woman. Even from a distance the photo showed her striking blue eyes looking out just above prominent cheekbones and full red lips. She would have seemed at home on the red carpet of Old Hollywood as much as next to the horse trainer she took for her husband.

Several more photos depicted the former Wyse family throughout the years. First a young son who closely resembled his mother, and a daughter who in turn took after her father Cooper. In each photo they appeared quite content, every bit the loving American family.

Dublin was paying particular attention to the photos, before finally turning back to Cooper.

“They’re all so beautiful Mr. Wyse. I’m very sorry for your loss. It must have been difficult for you.”

Cooper Wyse looked away for a brief moment before responding to Dublin.

“Yeah.”

Silence hung between Cooper and his guests for nearly a minute until Mac changed the subject.

“So how about that meal you promised Coop?”

Dublin took a step toward the kitchen while holding up her hands to the men.

“I’ll take care of that, you boys sit down and relax. Mr. Wyse, is it ok with you if I prepare dinner for us?”

Cooper’s mind still appeared to be

drifting back to the memories of his wife and children.

“Mr. Wyse, is that ok?”

Dublin’s question hung in the air unanswered.

“Mr. Wyse?”

Finally Cooper replied.

“That would be great Dublin, thank you. Haven’t had someone do the cooking around here for...for a long time now. Not much left in there as I knew I might be gone for a spell, but what’s left you’re welcome to make something of

it.”

Dublin’s head disappeared inside the fridge momentarily before turning back around to ask Cooper another question.

“You have any vegetables Mr. Wyse?”

Cooper gave a small smile and shrugged.

“Vegetables...sure, there’s some big steaks in there. Took ‘em out of the freezer just a couple days ago.”

Dublin looked confused.

“No, I said vegetables Mr. Wyse. Not

steaks. Do you have any vegetables?”

Cooper Wyse nodded.

“That’s right. The critters eat the vegetables. I eat the critters. So I figure that’s a two for one, right? Get your vegetables and your protein, all in one bite.”

Dublin’s face contorted into further confusion as Bear let out a booming laugh, his hand smacking down onto the top of his thigh. His reaction was soon accompanied by more laughter from Reese and Mac.

Bear pointed toward Cooper.

“I think I might get to like you Coop. Two for one!”

Brando, who was seated next to Cooper, looked at the three other men laughing and then laid down on the floor and rested his head on his front paws, indicating he held little current interest in the jokes of humans.

Dublin rolled her eyes before taking the steaks from the fridge and placing them onto the countertop next to the stove.

“Sorry Dublin, old cowboy humor. Look in the pantry at the far end of the kitchen there. Should find some

potatoes, spices, whatever you can find, feel free to use. The stove is propane – self ignites. Turn it on and have at it.”

Cooper Wyse then motioned to the others to sit down.

“I have some home brew beer – you boys want to try it?”

Mac’s eyes widened at the mention of home brewed beer. For the former Dominatus tavern owner, the topic remained one of great interest to him.

“You brew?”

“Yeah, been doing it for about ten years.

Have it set up in the old well house in the back.”

Like Mac, Bear’s enthusiasm revealed itself.

“Steak and beer – now we’re talking!”

Cooper, with Brando following close behind, went back out the front door of the house as the sound and smells of steak hitting a hot frying pan emanated from the kitchen. A few minutes later he returned with a box under his arm, the sound of tinkling bottles accompanying his steps.

The box was placed on the large coffee

table and opened up to reveal a dozen plain dark glass bottles. Cooper used a small opener to open a bottle and then pass it to one of his guests until each of the men was seated and holding a sample of his beer.

Mac sniffed deeply from the top of his bottle's neck and held his breath in for several seconds before exhaling slowly.

“Unfiltered?”

Cooper nodded.

Mac took a small sip and swirled the dark liquid in his mouth.

“Very little carbonation, I like that. Very rich flavors here Coop. Do you pasteurize?”

Cooper shook his head.

“No, this is very Old World. What my grandparents called “real beer”.

Mac took a larger drink and smiled.

“Very smooth. Has that bitter bite toward the end, but it actually balances out the smoothness. Has a great malt-dominated flavor. This would of been a top seller back in Dominatus.”

For the next ten minutes both men

discussed the merits and faults of various methods of brewing. It was clear a bond was being formed between the two oldest members of the group, and the more comfortable Cooper Wyse became, the more willing he was to talk.

Eventually the talk wore on the nerves of Bear, who cut the two men off.

“For the love of God, it’s beer. Don’t sit there analyzing it – drink it!”

With that, Bear finished his bottle and set it down before motioning toward the open box.

“Mind if I have another?”

Reese finished his beer as well and was already reaching into the box to get himself and Bear a second bottle.

Cooper smiled with pride, pleased the men found his beer acceptable.

“I’d take offense if you didn’t, you big bastard.”

Cooper and Mac also opened another bottle.

Dublin called out from the kitchen.

“No hangovers boys. Don’t forget we’re off to save the world first thing

tomorrow morning.”

Cooper Wyse leaned back in his leather chair, his face falling into a melancholy smile.

“Hmmm...been a long time since I heard a woman tell me to watch my drinking. A lifetime ago. I do miss having a pretty lady try and tell me what to do.”

Cooper's eyes wandered back to the photos on the fireplace mantel as his left hand placed itself gently on Brando's head. He paused, his emotions tumbling into one another, before he returned his gaze to Reese.

“I listened to your program Mr. Neeson. The one you gave up there in Dominatus a couple years back. In the cave. I have a little short wave set up in the back bedroom of the house. I sat in there and listened to you tell that story. Mac’s story. Dublin’s story. Her grandfather’s story. Thing is, the names were different. The place. The background. Still...I sat there and listened to you and realized you were telling my story too. My wife and my kids’ story...all the people who I had known and loved and had been so hurt by this global government bullshit. I was one of those ten thousand who made their way up to Dominatus to try and save you. Me and Franklin, the fella you met yesterday in

Juneau. Thousands of us just decided enough was enough and we weren't gonna let them kill all of you trapped up there in that cave."

The sounds from the kitchen grew quiet as Dublin strained to hear Cooper Wyse tell his own story.

"Thing is, it worked now didn't it? Once enough people woke up and said enough is enough – why all those New United Nations boys we had running things up here just turned and left. They don't really believe in what they were part of any more than we did. Hell, half of them stayed behind and promised to fight if the New United Nations came

back. I just have to think...if we had woken up sooner. Years before, how many people would have been saved? How many people would have had the chance to live their lives in freedom? But we didn't. We just kept giving up a little bit of freedom here and a little bit more there until finally, it was pretty much all gone.

I can remember Grandfather Wyse – he was a mean old guy. Damn hard man. Had an accent so heavy it was hard to understand him sometimes. Now he had come over here, bought up these acres and built a home in Alaska because he knew things weren't right in Ireland. Europe. The EU and the financial mess,

he came here like so many did before him. He just wanted a chance at a better life and to be left alone to live it. The last few years of his life he started to warn us that what he saw back in Ireland was happening in the states. My dad brushed him off. They would argue about it all the time. Then my grandfather was gone, grandmother a couple years after him, and life went on.

Dad got thrown from a horse he was breaking - thrown bad. His right hip was never the same. He couldn't ride for more than an hour before the pain would get to be too much. His moods got ugly around here and I spent more and more time at the horse shows...met

my wife at one of those shows in Spokane. Washington State. She was a Pullman student, studying to be a veterinarian. I was twenty four, she was a few years younger. Her folks raised horses, had a big ranch in Grant County about ninety minutes from Pullman. We dated a few times, I came back here. We called each other, emailed...I counted the days until I would be back in her neck of the woods so I could see her again.

One of those trips to Pullman I got a call from my mom. Dad had...the pain was so bad. He had had two surgeries on that hip already and they had him on all kinds of pain medications, and some

kind of anti-depressant, but...well it was the fact he couldn't ride a horse. That was killing him. Literally killing him. His head wasn't right, losing control of his emotions. Mom admitted a few months later, he had hit her a couple times. Hard. He had never come close to doing something like that before. Never. She blamed the pills. Doctors were giving him one thing and then another thing. It was tough to keep track of what he was on after a while.

So I got that call, Mom was...she was actually quite calm. Said she had found my dad in the barn. Found him dead. He had written a short note and left it pinned on the inside of the door.

*I'm sorry. Just no good anymore.
Used up. Please forgive me.*

He had taken a whole bottle of those pills and lay down to die, his head resting on his favorite saddle. And that was that – he never woke up. I came back home, back to help my mom and to bury Dad. Laid him in the ground here with my grandparents. Mom, like I said, she was calm the day she told me, but within a few weeks after we buried Dad, she was falling apart herself. I didn't know how to fix that kind of broken. It was inside her. She blamed herself. Said she should have tried to get Dad to some better doctors, should have not let

him be so stubborn about it. She though she should have been more aware of just how much pain he was really in. How much the pills were getting him all mixed up in his head.”

Cooper paused in his story, looking toward the kitchen at Dublin.

“My wife, Arlene...she was a hell of a woman. Smart. Beautiful. Didn't mind getting her hands dirty working outside, but could clean herself up and put on a dress and look like she belonged on one of those magazine covers. She came back with me to the ranch here and took to helping my mom. Just like that. No questions. Mom fell in love with her,

would joke with me that Arlene was too good for me. Out of my league. Like I didn't know that already. We were married in the Catholic Church in Juneau. I'm not particularly religious but my mom insisted. She was very old school that way...attending Mass, Confession, all of that. I think a lot of it was to help remind her of my dad in a way. His family was very Irish Catholic.

We had some real good years here, Arlene and me and my mom. Then came the two kids and, well...life got even better. At least for a while. Stories about weird stuff going on in the Lower 48 were being told more and more

though. The new agreements with the United Nations, all the chaos in Canada and Mexico, people getting thrown into those re-education centers if they said the wrong thing, or thought the wrong thing, ate the wrong foods, all the crap that kind of crept up on the country.

Arlene was talking regularly with her folks back in Washington State, trying to get them to come up here where she thought it would be better for them. We had the room and I liked her folks well enough. That was part of the reason for her trip. She went and I stayed back home here to watch my mom. She had a bad cold at the time, needed a little help taking care of herself. Arlene said she'd

just be gone a week or so. Drove down, met with her folks. She called me every night to say how things were going, let me say goodnight to the kids. By then the news was blacked out...nothing was being told about what was going on in Grant County, or that encampment where a bunch of people were trying to live away from all the new government mandates. The police state of the United States some were calling it. It was her third night at her parents' house when Arlene mentioned it. Told me she saw a convoy of hundreds of military vehicles that had on a blue and white emblem that said New United Nations on it. Drove right down the road next to her parents' place. Then she mentioned all the

drones that were flying overhead every hour of the day, one after the other. They didn't make any noise but you could see them creeping across the sky. People in the area were getting nervous and so was she.

Well, I told her to head back home. She insisted she was going to stay just a day or two longer to convince her folks to come back with her. Before she left she had no idea how bad things had gotten down there – and now she was really worried about her mom and dad staying behind by themselves with all those drones and military vehicles in the area. She knew something wasn't right.

Her fourth night there, she called me again. I could tell her voice, she was really worried. Told me two men had come to her parents' house that day. Came in and asked a bunch of questions. Asked if they knew any of the people who were at the encampment that was about five miles away from their house. Then they found Arlene's dad's gun. It was an old family hunting rifle handed down from his grandfather. They found that gun and a half empty box of ammo that went with it. Arlene said her dad told those soldiers, she called them soldiers, but they were compliance officers. Her dad told those compliance officers he hadn't even moved that gun from the closet in about ten years and it

hadn't been fired for longer than that - just an old hunting rifle. The officers took down all their names, took the gun and the ammo, and then they left. Arlene promised she was leaving the next day and her parents were coming with her. Just like before, I was able to say goodnight to the kids.

That was the last time I ever spoke to my wife or my kids. Two, three days go by and no word. Then I start to hear rumors about some kind of military action in Grant County, Washington - a couple Internet reports. Then those reports are taken down and there's no information at all about what happened. I go into Juneau and ask around - nothing.

Another day goes by and a county sheriff pays a visit to the house here. I know him. He was a friend of my dad's. Name was Tillman. He tells me there's word of some kind of rebellion in Grant County, and some locals in the area got caught in the middle. He says he's got no information on Arlene or my kids' whereabouts, but promises to let me know if he hears anything. He never comes back. Two more days and I try to look him up in Juneau. He's been reassigned they tell me – and that's all they tell me. Sheriff Tillman just disappeared. Gone. By then I'm figuring somebody didn't like him going out of his way to talk to me.

So by then, I'm a hell of a mess. I'm calling out to anyone and everyone I know in Washington State about where my wife and kids are. Nobody has any information. Or, they don't want to talk to me. Then my phone service is cut off. My Internet access is shut down. It's nearly two weeks since I last heard from Arlene. Two damn weeks. Then I get something in the mail. Plain white envelope with no return address. Inside are two aerial photos of a house. One shows the house with the address printed below it, and the other shows that house blown to bits. Almost nothing left of it. There's a truck in the driveway though. Damaged, but still enough of it there in the picture for me to recognize it. My

truck. The one Arlene drove to see her parents. The house was their house.”

“Ah shit...”

Mac’s two words spoke for the other three who were listening intently to Cooper Wyse’s story.

“I show my mother the photos, tell her something bad might have happened. She just...she broke apart. Screaming. Sobbing. For days. I’m holding out hope though. Maybe Arlene got out of that house. Maybe her and the kids and her folks are holed up somewhere trying to make their way back to me. Then the other envelope arrives. Five copies of

five little cards. Has their names on it. It's some kind of death report. A very brief one. Simply says, **Grant County, WA : Subjects terminated.**

I figured it was Tillman, the sheriff that disappeared. He was trying to let me know what happened. I still don't know for sure though. I want to drive on down there myself to check it out. Ask questions. Kill the evil sons-a-bitches who did it.

Then we get word here, all around Juneau, that the border was already shut down. I go into town and see a dozen of those New United Nations vehicles Arlene had told me about a few weeks

earlier. I can't get into the Lower 48 – at least not legally. Alaska was getting taken over. The law enforcement uniforms were changed to the New United Nations. The signs were changed over. A bunch of checkpoints were put in place, they were watching you everywhere you went. The news stations, the local papers, all shut down. They did it in a matter of just a few weeks. The whole thing was changed over. You all were already living up in Dominatus by then, right? The Old Man, Dublin's grandfather, he had seen it all coming years earlier. Not me. Not most of us. And then, it just sort of happened. We went from living in the United States of America to...something else.

Something a whole lot worse.

So I took care of my mom, but she just kind of faded off into nothing until she died a few years after what happened in Grant County. She said less and less about it until she stopped talking about anything toward the end. Just sat and stared into nothing. I took to talking a lot less myself. Everything just kind of turned inward I suppose. I made sure to make this place as self-sufficient as possible. Hunkered down here and kept to myself. The compliance officers would check in every month or so, but they didn't seem to pay me much attention. They'd poke around a little and then be on their way."

Reese interrupted to ask a question of Cooper.

“Did you ever make it down to Grant County? Find out for sure what happened to your wife and kids?”

Cooper Wyse took a long slow drink from his beer as Brando raised his head to look at him, seemingly also awaiting the answer to the question Reese had just asked.

“Yeah, about eight years ago. Came in through Canada - wasn't easy but I did it. Found a relative of Arlene's parents. Her dad's brother who lived about ten

miles from their house. It was funny, I just showed up in the evening and knocked on the back door. He opened it up, took a look at me and just said, ‘It’s about time you got here.’

They had been expecting me to show up eventually. We talked for a little less than an hour, and then he told me I had to go. They were worried they were being watched. Everyone down there was worried about that. It was just like those movies I would see as a kid about the Cold War – the Soviet Union.

He said a bunch of the homes around the area had been bombed at the same time the encampment was eliminated. A

crew went around and collected any remains that were found and they were all just thrown into a mass grave and covered up. Arlene's uncle knew someone who had been a part of that work and he confirmed that Arlene, her parents, and my son and daughter, what was left of them...were thrown into that grave.

Made my way back here to my home and I waited. I waited for a chance to do something. To fight back. To destroy the thing that had taken from me everything that meant anything. So now here you all are. I have my chance to help you out, to get you to that priest in Churchill, Manitoba. To get you to the

weapon that's supposed to help destroy the New United Nations.

I aim to do just that.”

Dublin called from the kitchen that the meal was ready. After the telling of his story, each of them had come to realize that Cooper Wyse had suffered just as much if not more than even the former residents of Dominatus had at the hands of the New United Nations. Cooper was welcomed into their group. He had become one of them.

Mac leaned forward in his seat, his eyes narrowing as he looked back at Cooper.

“We’re glad to have your help Coop. I sincerely mean that.”

Seated at the Wyse dinner table, the four men ate the meal of steak and potatoes with considerable enthusiasm, pausing only briefly to thank Dublin for preparing it. Within twenty minutes, all of the meal was gone, as was the beer Cooper had brought in. Bear was the first to make his way to a bedroom for sleep, followed soon after by Reese and Dublin, and then Cooper Wyse.

Mac stayed back in the main room, seated next to a window looking out into the clear night sky. His cough returned momentarily, breaking the silence within

the near complete darkness of the home's interior. Mac heard Brando approaching in that darkness, the Doberman's long snout finally coming to rest on his thigh. Looking down, Mac could see the dog peering back up at him as if to ask if he was going to be ok.

“You think I’m a used up old man too don’t you? Maybe you’re right. Hell... probably are. I think I got another round left in me yet though Brando. Just one more mission to see if I still got a little bite left in this old bark.”

VI.

Mac, who had slept on the largest of the leather couches in Cooper's living room area, woke early, as was his long standing habit. To his surprise, he spotted Cooper already outside saddling the horses as Brando sat watching near the barn's entrance.

Taking a moment to stretch his muscles, Mac walked out of the home and made his way toward the barn and Cooper Wyse, who gave Mac a greeting with the tip of his cowboy hat.

“Morning Coop – surprised you were able to get out here without waking me up. I'm normally a very light sleeper.”

Cooper gave a slight shrug and continued to check the saddle straps, the supply bags, and the overall condition of the horses.

Mac had not been so close to a horse in many years, and found their size to be somewhat intimidating, though he had no intention of letting Cooper know that.

“Which one will I be riding?”

Cooper stepped over to one a horse that was a mixture of white and black colors , with a long slender neck and head.

“I broke every one of these, all a mix of

this and that. Yours is a good old girl named Chess. She's got quite a bit of Thoroughbred in her. Used to be very spirited, but she's a real easy going lady now, but can get you somewhere in a hurry if you need to."

Mac moved slowly alongside Chess and ran his hand along her neck.

"Well hello there Chess. I'm Mac. Just don't throw me off and you and me will get along just fine."

Brando had moved over to Mac's left, and was nuzzling his other hand.

"Well hello there Brando! I see you're

up and ready to go as well!”

Cooper Wyse tilted his head slightly as he noted Brando’s attention to Mac.

“Never seen that dog go out of his way to be nice like he’s done for you Mac.”

Mac leaned down and placed both of his hands around Brando’s head and scratched behind the Doberman’s ears, to which the dog responded by nuzzling Mac’s neck. Cooper shook his head and smiled.

“Hope you ain’t turning my dog soft Mac. He’s supposed to be a touch more intimidating than that.”

Mac stood up, coughing slightly as he attempted to clear his throat.

“Oh hell, I’m pretty sure old Brando there would prove himself as mean as he needed to be. Those are some serious chompers he’s got inside that mouth of his.”

Seemingly understanding what Mac just said, Brando pulled back his lips to reveal his teeth in a both frightening and amusing snarling smile.

Mac pointed to the dog and then looked over at Cooper, his eyes widening in shock.

“Did your dog just smile at me?”

Cooper Wyse waived a dismissive hand toward Brando as he continued to check over the horses.

“He’s done that for years. It’s a common thing Dobermans do. Means he’s happy.”

Mac looked back down at Brando’s grinning snarl.

“Well I’ll be damned...”

Bear’s heavy footed approach could be heard making its way down from the

front porch. He came to within ten feet of the horses and remained there, his arms folded across his chest and his eyes conveying more than a fair amount of suspicion at the idea of riding atop the back of an animal.

“So you really don’t think we could just use an ATV or something? Seems like it would be a hell of a lot faster.”

Cooper stepped from behind the largest of the horses and looked at Bear silently for several seconds before responding.

“First off, I told you that anything mechanical gets the attention of the drones. That’s why I had you walk all

the way here. That's why we can't be firing up some machine and crossing the border. I've made the trip hundreds of times already. It's my way or no way big man. Besides, I've got you sitting on Ben here. He's a big old fella. You two were made for each other. Trust him to get you there and that's what he'll do."

Bear glanced at the large, solid brown-colored horse before glaring back at Cooper.

"It's gonna take us forever on these things."

Cooper turned back to the horses as he responded to Bear's dissatisfaction.

“Not really, and we can get places on a horse we never could riding some machine. Trust me Bear, once you get the hang of it, you’ll understand. It might take you a bit, but you’ll get there. And this horse, Ben, he’ll prove himself to you. He’s the hardest worker you’ll ever find, and he likes to please. Just tell him where to go and he’ll do it.”

Mac stepped next to Bear and gave him pat on the back.

“I’m pretty sure between the two of you, that horse is getting the worse of the deal Bear.”

Bear's still constant glare now turned toward Mac.

“This ain't funny Mac. I don't like those things. I've never been on a horse in my life.”

Mac laughed.

“I think it's just a matter of you not liking to be next to something that's bigger than you. And you grew up in Texas, right? How in the hell have you not ever been on a horse?”

Bear set his jaw, his words barely escaping between his clenched teeth.

“I don’t do things I don’t want to and I never wanted to get on a horse. I told you – this isn’t funny. I don’t like horses.”

Mac’s demeanor quickly turned from friendly to fierce as he placed himself directly in front of Bear and looked up into his face, pointing at the large man as he made clear his frustration at Bear’s negativity.

“You can either get yourself on that horse when it’s time, or walk your ass back to Juneau. It’s gonna be one or the other Bear. And I don’t want to hear another goddamn word about it.”

Bear's eyes flashed dangerously down at Mac.

“Get that finger out of my face Mac, or I will break it off.”

Before Mac could respond to Bear's threat, Brando did so first. The large Doberman lunged toward Bear while unleashing three loud warning barks. Bear took several steps backwards as Brando placed himself between Bear and Mac, the hair on the dog's neck beginning to stand up as his eyes locked onto Bear's slightest movement.

“That dog takes another step toward me and I'll kill it.”

Bear's voice made clear he meant it.

The unmistakable sound of a revolver hammer being clicked into place was the first thing to answer Bear's threat as Cooper Wyse emerged from among the horses with a classic Colt Frontier Six Shooter pointed in the big man's direction.

“Oh...I don't think so Bear. My dog is just protecting Mac. No need to be making those kinds of threats. We're all supposed to be on the same team here, right? Now I get you're afraid of getting on a horse. It's actually a common fear plenty of people have. I'm gonna help

you through that and in a day or two, you're gonna be just fine with it. Until then, I can't have you threatening my dog like that. Just don't sit right and frankly, well...I consider it just plain rude."

Mac's attention was already focused on Cooper's choice of firearm.

"How old is that thing Coop?"

Cooper kept the gun pointed at Bear while he replied to Mac.

"1926 - have a pair of them. Got an original ammo belt and everything. Very Old West...that's how I like to roll."

Mac looked from Cooper's gun and back to Bear, and then back to Cooper.

“Oh for fuck's sake, put down that gun. And Bear, you calm the hell down. No need to go on acting like such a damn fool. Now tell Coop here you're sorry for threatening his dog.”

Bear's jaw dropped at the suggestion.

“What?”

“You heard me – tell Mr. Wyse here you're sorry for threatening Brando like that, so we can move on from this and get ready to head on out.”

Cooper Wyse un-cocked his gun and lowered it.

Bear's expression transformed from one of rage to hurt.

“All we been through Mac and you're taking his side?”

Mac rolled his eyes at his former Dominatus neighbor.

“C'mon Bear, it ain't about choosing his side. You're in the wrong and you just need to apologize and we're good to go. So man up, and let's move on.”

Cooper shrugged at Mac.

“He don’t need to do that Mac. No big thing. I don’t need any apology.”

Bear growled back at Cooper.

“I’ll apologize if I want to, but you’re the one who was pointing a gun at me. Seems like maybe you owe me the apology.”

Cooper shrugged again.

“Fine – sorry. Won’t happen again. Well, that is unless you threaten my dog.”

Bear finally managed a smile.

“Yeah, got it. Sorry about that. I still say that damn dog has it in for me though.”

It was Cooper’s turn to smile.

“Oh, no doubt about it. Brando don’t like you one bit, especially if you go picking on his new best friend Mac.”

Reese and Dublin were making their way toward the men and horses. Dublin stopped a few feet away, her eyes indicating how much she was looking forward to the horse ride across the border and into the provinces.

“So which one is mine?”

Cooper Wyse took the bridle of a black and white horse that had a particularly short, thick neck and especially wide hoofed feet, and led her toward Dublin.

“This here is Peanut. She’s a little older than the rest, but without a doubt the best trail horse of the bunch. She’ll just go and go and go. Never seems to get tired. If I had to pack in a big batch of whatever, it’s usually Peanut here who gets the job. She sits low and sturdy, like a tank.”

Dublin stroked Peanut’s comparatively short face with her hand, then gave the

horse a gentle pat on her right shoulder.

“She’s a beautiful little lady Mr. Wyse. Thank you.”

Cooper gave Peanut a loving look, scratching just under her chin.

“Yes she is. You two should get along just fine. Do you have experience riding horses Dublin?”

Dublin was now looking over the well worn leather saddle that was strapped atop Peanut’s back.

“Actually, yes. A little bit when I was a girl. I did a riding club one summer a

couple years before I came up to Dominatus with Grandfather. Before... before my mother died. She loved horses and kept one at a stable just outside the city. We would visit there sometimes.”

Cooper turned to Reese.

“And what about you Reese? How much riding have you done?”

Reese shook his head.

“Very little. I might have sat on one for a picture at a county fair once. That’s about it. Frankly, I’m pretty nervous about the idea of it.”

Cooper Wyse pointed to Bear.

“See Bear, you’re not the only one who’s feeling a bit anxious. You both are going to do just fine. You’ll all be following my lead. These horses know the way in and back, and know to just keep up with as little fuss as possible.

That does leave me with another question though. I figure Mac knows how to shoot a gun well enough, and from what I hear, Bear can certainly take care of himself just fine. What about you two?”

Both Reese and Dublin stood next to

each other. Dublin opened her jacket to reveal a holstered handgun under her left arm. Upon opening his jacket, Reese showed the very same handgun kept in the same location as Dublin's.

Mac stepped next to Reese and clapped him on the shoulder.

“Dublin here, she's been shooting for years. Almost everyone in Dominatus carried a side arm, or at least owned a rifle. She's been a fine shooter for quite some time now. Reese here, well he came to us not so keen on guns. After what we went through with the attacks by the New United Nations though, he changed his tune and I've been teaching

him as much as I can in the last couple years. If the need arises, he'll be more than up to the task of protecting himself and others.”

Cooper gave a brief nod, indicating he was satisfied with Mac's response.

“Ok then, I have all the supplies packed up and ready to go. We have enough food and water to last us a few days, which is more than enough to get us to the drop cabin. I would prefer we don't go near a city or town on the way – the less interaction we have with people the better.”

Mac pointed off in the direction of the

hills they were to be travelling through momentarily.

“What’s the deal with Canada Coop? I’ve heard a few things here and there over the years, how it’s been a place for...well, kind of anything goes. But is it really that dangerous? Any more dangerous than say, the Lower 48 and all its compliance officers?”

“Different kind of danger Mac, but just as deadly if you’re not careful. I haven’t gone too far into Canada’s interior. Mainly just to the drop cabin I share with my supplier that’s about a full days ride from here. He’s the one who tells me what things are really like in the

urban areas. And it's not good. The Muslims took it over almost entirely about ten years ago. Almost every city, they were dumped into the country by the tens of thousands for several years and were allowed to go after anyone and anything that opposed them. Bloody and brutal. Thousands of beheadings, tens of thousands of women raped. Families, children...killed during what they called infidel trials.”

Bear gave a nod toward Cooper.

“I heard some of that too. Last year a trapper, nice old guy, he said he spent a couple years about twenty miles outside Dawson Creek working several trap

lines. He went into the city for supplies one day and saw a woman get her throat cut from ear to ear right in the middle of the street. Her body was left there for the rest of the day as some kind of symbolic gesture to everyone else to not step out of line. They had Sharia Law postings on every street, in every business and there would be a group of twenty or thirty thugs with machetes roaming the streets day and night just looking to go after someone. And Dawson Creek is kind of in the middle of nowhere, right? He said he wouldn't get caught in some of the bigger cities like Vancouver or Toronto for anything. If Dawson Creek was that scary, those other places have to be total terrors,

especially for someone with white skin, or God forbid – openly Christian.”

“So how much of a chance do we have of actually making it all the way to the priest?”

Reese’s question remained unanswered for several seconds as Mac looked to Cooper Wyse, who in turn, simply shrugged back at Reese. Finally Mac issued a reply.

“We make our way carefully. Avoid the urban areas. It’ll take some time, but it can be done. No drones to worry about – at least not that many. No compliance officers, just a whole lot of land and

some asshole Muslim fanatics running the cities. That makes it no different than say, Somalia about thirty years ago. I used to go in and out of there regularly. It was never done easy, but it was done. Besides, like was said before – if there's a weapon out there that can bring down the New United Nations, I'm willing to take that risk. Take any risk if I have to.”

Cooper looked down at a gold pocket watch that hung from his leather vest and then returned his gaze back to the group.

“We need to be gettin’. The next drone should be passing over those hills in about an hour. I want us well away and

on the other side by then. We need to get to the cabin, and then we can review our route from there. There's a loaded rifle strapped to the right side of each of your saddles, and a canteen of water. In the pouch right by the horn is one of those handheld short waves you saw in the barn yesterday. Each one is set with an already programmed default frequency. If anyone gets lost, just press the little button on the side and we'll be able to communicate with each other.

So, let's saddle up then and be on our way."

Cooper Wyse placed his left foot into a stirrup and swung himself gracefully into

the saddle atop his horse – a medium sized chocolate colored mare he called Licorice. He looked back to see Mac doing the same, though with a bit more effort and considerably less grace than Cooper. Reese too struggled just a bit, while Dublin turned to help Bear, who had broken out into a noticeable sweat as he stared at the saddle stirrup.

“It’s ok Bear, just put your foot in there, grab the saddle horn and pull yourself up.”

Bear’s jaw clenched and unclenched as he put his large left foot into the stirrup and grasped the saddle horn tightly with his right hand. After pausing yet again,

he closed his eyes and pulled himself up, the considerable weight of his body landing into the saddle causing Bear's horse to let out a grunt.

His eyes opened again and Bear looked down at the ground below him, the knuckles of his right hand whitening as his grip on the saddle horn tightened even further. Dublin looked up at Bear and smiled, and then turned and mounted her own horse almost as effortlessly as Cooper Wyse had done his.

Cooper scanned the property before putting his fingers to his mouth and whistling loudly. Within seconds Brando came running from behind the

barn to sit motionless no more than twenty feet from the group, the dog's eyes looking intently at Cooper for further instructions.

“Brando! Go! Trail! Trail!”

Cooper pointed toward the hills behind his property as Brando turned and ran at full speed in the same direction, his red coloring appearing and then disappearing inside the tall grass of the fields.

Mac smiled at Brando's impressive display of speed.

“That is one fast dog there Coop. What

do you have him doing?”

Cooper looked back at Mac.

“Brando runs ahead of me to make sure the way is clear, watches for bears and such. He’s made the trip enough times now he knows exactly where we’re going.”

“So he’s doing recon work for you, that it?”

Cooper Wyse gave another of his now familiar shrugs.

“Yeah, guess that’s a way of putting it.”

Mac shook his head as he continued to watch Brando speed across the field.

“Hell of a dog.”

Cooper gave a soft kick to the side of his horse Licorice and began following the path Brando had just made, motioning the other four to follow him.

“Just let your horse follow me and Licorice. We’ll start off slow, and then once you all are more comfortable, we can pick up the pace. Once we hit the hills, we’ll slow up again – the trail gets steep in some places and there may still be a bit of snow up there in places. We’ll be going northeast for a while to

avoid having to cross a river, and then once we are inside Canada, we'll start to go more directly east. If we make good time, we'll be at the cabin before nightfall."

Mac followed behind Cooper, and behind him rode Reese and Dublin. The last to follow was Bear, who leaned forward and whispered quietly into the right ear of his horse Ben.

"How about we make a deal Ben? You don't let me fall off and I don't turn you into glue?"

At the entrance to the Wyse ranch, some two miles away, a lone human like

figure was crawling atop the ground. It wore no clothing, its sinewy dark body devoid of any indications of it being male or female. Its thick hairless skin was mottled and dark, almost leather like. Long fingered hands tapered off into curved, claw like nails - nails that now dug into the pebbled ground that was the narrow drive leading to Cooper Wyse's home. It emitted a high pitched, whining growl, growing more excited as it continued to inhale the scent of the four humans who had stopped to rest at this very location just yesterday.

The creature's face was incredibly narrow, though its mouth was large enough that its thin, black-purple lips

nearly touched the lower portions of each of its ears. The nose that continued to inhale and exhale loudly was short and flat, with massive nostrils flaring outward just above the freakishly wide mouth. Two large eyes were filled almost completely by massive dilated, midnight black pupils.

Having satisfied itself with confirming the scent of the four humans, the thing stood up to survey the area around it. Its back was severely humped causing the creature to stoop forward as it attempted to raise its nose into the slight breeze that blew around it. The humped portion of its back stretched and pulled under its dark skin as it moved toward the fence

Mac had leaned on the day before.

The wide mouth grew even wider as the thing seemed to grin, exposing two rows of jagged, deadly-looking teeth that would have been more at home in the mouth of a bat than that of anything remotely human. Again it began to issue that high pitched, whining growl as it suddenly squatted down against one of the fence posts and loudly regurgitated a black tar like substance that smelled of rotting flesh. The thing's head moved quickly from side to side as it inhaled the contents of what it had just thrown up.

The creature returned to its semi-

standing crouch position and looked in the direction of the Wyse ranch, its clawed fingers clicking against each other as the thing processed the signals being sent into it by the small electronic transmission device implanted around its brain stem. Thousands of miles away inside the genetic drone information annex of the New United Nations Military Response Center in Maryland, the scent and visual information being transmitted by the creature was already being reviewed by data operatives to determine the creature's next response, while yet another set of eyes was watching from within the seeker's vision as well.

Finally the thing began to run toward the Wyse home with an odd, sideways bent gait where its arms hung loosely in front of it while its legs carried it across the ground with surprising speed that would have proven difficult for even the fastest man to outrun.

As it sped down the long drive, the seeker's sharp toothed smile and high pitched growl returned.

VII.

After ten minutes of the horses walking through the high grass fields behind the

Wyse ranch, Cooper glanced back to see how the other four were acclimating to being in their respective saddles. Each one of them appeared more comfortable than they had been just moments before. Even Bear was no long perspiring heavily, his natural athleticism now moving him in rhythm to the walking of his horse.

“Ok everyone, gonna pick up the pace just a bit now. An easy trot for the next fifteen minutes or so. Try not to bounce in your saddle, just move along with the horse. Here we go...”

Cooper Wyse gently nudged the flanks of his horse Licorice, who in turn began to

trot across the field, doubling their speed. The other four horses did exactly the same in order to keep up with the lead horse. The ranch house was disappearing behind them as the large hills they were heading for now loomed ahead.

Dublin was grinning happily as she watched the ground pass more quickly below her. Reese, whose horse remained just slightly behind Dublin's, was looking intently into the hills trying to figure out the path Cooper intended to take them through. Bear, trailing some ten yards behind Reese, was bouncing uncomfortably in his saddle, but otherwise appeared reasonably

determined to continue the ride without further complaint.

With less than a half mile to go before the ground began to rise rapidly into the hills, Cooper brought his horse to a stop.

“Gonna let them gallop a bit now, okay? Just let your horse keep pace with mine. Again, just move with the horse, and try to remain as relaxed as possible. We won’t be going all out, just a nice easy pace. Bear, you’re doing great.”

Cooper Wyse turned his horse back toward the hills and let out a brief shout, this time kicking Licorice’s flanks with a bit more force than before. Licorice set

off with a gentle gallop that was soon matched by the other four horses. Now it was Mac's turn to smile as he closed his eyes for a brief moment and took in a deep breath as the wind whipped into his face.

Reese was startled to see Bear pulling up beside him and then passing both he and Dublin, his jaw set with determination as he lowered himself just over the back of Ben's neck and let out his own shout of encouragement for his horse to increase its speed. Soon he was alongside Mac whose smile widened even further as he gave Bear a thumbs up.

Bear passed Mac and was soon just behind Cooper Wyse who glanced over to see Bear pulling up alongside him. With a tip of his hat, Cooper pressed the heels of his boots into Licorice's flanks again while lowering his chest directly against the horse's neck. The mare responded instantly, lengthening her stride to pull away from Bear. The speed at which Licorice galloped while Cooper Wyse remained atop her shocked the other four. Within seconds Cooper was nearly fifty yards ahead of the others before he slowed down and allowed them to catch up. Just a few minutes more and they reached the base of the hills where Cooper again pulled up to stop. The horses, though breathing

somewhat heavily now, appeared quite capable and anxious for more travel.

Cooper pointed a hand toward a row of Evergreens nearly a hundred yards to their left.

“We make our way to that line of trees, and a bit past them, we’ll come to the trail. It’s a bit narrow, so stay in line. I’ll have the horses going at a quick walk. Again, just have your horse follow my lead. We should reach the top in about thirty minutes. That should give us a good ten minutes to get deep into the trees on the other side before the surveillance drone is back this way again.”

Once past the row of Evergreens a mass of boulders could be seen. Cooper headed directly for the big rocks, disappearing momentarily behind the largest of them. The other four followed and soon found Cooper and Licorice heading upward, following the trail Cooper had just spoken of. As described, the trail was narrow, and at times, uncomfortably steep. The horses appeared to know the way well though, as the four former residents of Dominatus made no attempt to steer them, but rather just sat in the saddle and allowed their horse to follow Cooper Wyse. Mac found himself glancing up into the sky, growing more concerned at

the possibility of a New United Nations drone approaching them.

As Cooper said, it took nearly thirty minutes to reach the top of the large hill. At the bottom of the other side, no more than a few hundred yards away, was an expanse of trees that stretched off toward a massive, ice and snow covered mountain range to the northeast. Far to the south of them could be seen a number of rivers emptying into a much larger body of water that the locals still called Gastineau Channel.

Reese was attempting to figure out the actual location of the old border between Canada and Alaska.

“Cooper, you said these hills marked where we would be crossing over into the Canada, right?”

Cooper looked back and gave a short nod.

“Yeah, that’s right. The surveillance drones fly right over this point. Never goes inside of it on either side.”

Reese’s face communicated his confusion.

“I know Juneau was close to Canada, but not this close. The border should be another couple hundred miles east

shouldn't it?"

Cooper answered this time without bothering to look back.

“That was a different world Reese. The border is whatever the New United Nations makes it. So if the drones are flying over these hills to monitor anyone going back and forth from here, then this is what I'm calling the border. So let's hurry up and get well into those trees before that next drone arrives.”

Without waiting to see if Reese had another question, Cooper Wyse nudged his horse downward toward the trees and the other four horses immediately

began to follow. Less than halfway down the other side, Dublin pointed into the sky to the south of them and uttered a single word that chilled them all.

“Drone.”

Bear quickly added to Dublin’s brief description with an even more frightening assessment.

“Two of them. I can see at least two of them and they’re making their way to us. Fast.”

Without looking to confirm what Dublin and Bear were seeing, Cooper Wyse yelled out for all of them to keep up.

Licorice began bounding down the narrow hillside trail as Cooper leaned as far back in his saddle as was possible to prevent himself from falling. The other four quickly copied Cooper's example as their horses struggled to keep up.

Though it took no more than a few minutes for the horses to reach the bottom of the hill, it felt far longer for the five Alaskans who desperately pushed their horses to gallop as fast as possible toward the tree line. Cooper looked back toward the top of the hill and saw the two drones. One was noticeably larger than the other – a type of drone he had never seen before. Mac

noted Cooper's stare and attempted to look back as well, though he almost fell from his saddle as he did so. The second time he managed to maintain his balance and saw the two drones for himself, including the larger one.

Mac knew then, they were all in very serious trouble.

“Go! Go!”

The horses responded to Mac's shouts, managing to race toward the trees even faster than before as if they too sensed how serious the urgency now was. The trees were less than a hundred yards away.

Cooper looked back again to yell instructions at the other four.

“There’s a trail inside there – follow me. Stay low on your horse and don’t slow down!”

The large Evergreens now loomed in front of them as Cooper and his horse disappeared into a small opening, followed by Mac, Dublin, and Reese. Bear and his horse Ben were almost thirty yards behind Reese. Seconds before reaching the opening, Bear first felt and then heard the first explosion behind him. Ducking as low as he could, he entered the trees and simply

allowed Ben to gallop along the trail as fast as he was able.

Bear glanced back in time to see the opening he had just ridden through become a massive fireball. The second explosion was close enough for him to feel the heat slam against his body. He could just make out the back of Reese turning a corner ahead of him.

The third explosion was just fifty yards to Bear's right. The drones were getting closer and Bear's instincts were now screaming that he may not survive the next missile.

“Shit.”

Bear's horse Ben strained to increase his speed, wanting to catch up to the other four. The animal stumbled just enough to cause Bear to lose his grip on the saddle's horn and tilt too far to the left. For a moment Bear thought he would be able to hang on, but that moment was gone as quickly as the big man fell from the saddle. He hit the ground hard, causing an excruciating flash of pain in his left shoulder and leaving him struggling to breathe. The horse continued to run ahead into the trees, leaving Bear alone and fighting to remain conscious. His mind kept telling himself to breathe. He needed to breathe. Just take a breath, stand back

up – and run.

Then the world went dark.

VIII.

“He’s dead. Can’t believe they killed him like that. What the hell was an armed drone doing flying over this area for? And how did they know where we were? Can’t be just some accident an armed drone shows up like that, exactly when we are coming down off the hill. How’s that possible? Who would have told someone at the New United Nations what we were doing? I want answers

Mac. I volunteered to help on this thing. To get you across and into Canada and now one of my horses is dead and I want to know how in the hell it happened. I've been going across those hills for years, and not once has a drone come close to spotting me do it, let alone taking shots at me! The first time I bring you all along, and I get one of my horses blown to hell. So start talking Mac. Tell me what the hell just happened here?"

Mac turned away from looking over Bear, who was still groggy from his high speed fall from the horse whose body had been ripped apart only seconds after Bear fell from the saddle. If not for that

fall, Bear too would now be dead.

“What happened was you never said nothing about a fucking armed drone in this area. That’s what happened. That drone was sent here to kill us. Period. The how and why of it, I don’t much care about that right now. What I do care about is that Bear is ok, and that we keep moving on to that cabin of yours. How much further is it?”

Cooper Wyse appeared less than satisfied at Mac’s response.

“Well, I AM interested in the how and why of it Mac. If you know something, I want to hear it - NOW.”

Mac was in no mood for the rancher's questions, taking two quick strides toward Cooper, he stopped directly in front of him, his eyes flashing an anger Cooper knew would pose a challenge despite Mac's advanced years. After a moment of staring at Cooper, Mac hissed a response.

“We need to get to that cabin now. After we are there and settled, we can talk about whatever the hell you want to talk about Coop. We might have company heading this way to confirm a kill, so I suggest we get moving out of here sooner than later. Anything short of that and you're gonna piss me off – and you

don't want to piss me off.”

If Cooper Wyse was intimidated by Mac, he didn't show it.

“Cabin is about a mile northwest of here. When we get there, I'm gonna take you up on giving me some answers Mac. Don't disappoint me.”

Mac gave the rancher a thin smile.

“Fine, now let's get moving.”

As Bear attempted to sit up he let out a cry of pain, his right hand resting on his left shoulder.

“Need someone to pop this thing back into place. It’s dislocated.”

Mac returned to Bear’s side and leaned over him.

“Your shoulder? It’s dislocated?”

Bear nodded.

“Yeah, had it happen a few times when I played football. After I lay down I just need you to grab my wrist and pull.”

Bear lay down again and slowly extended his left arm toward Mac, who in turn looked up at Reese and Dublin.

“Bear – I don’t know. I haven’t done that kind of thing in a long time. Don’t want to mess you up more than you already are...”

Bear cut off Mac’s hesitation.

“For God’s sake Mac, just grab my wrist and pull out. It’ll pop right back into place.”

Mac hesitated again, and found himself being pushed to the side by Dublin. The granddaughter of the billionaire founder of Dominatus grabbed Bear’s large wrist with both hands and did as he asked and pulled - hard.

Bear gave no indication of pain. He simply took a deep breath and then smiled.

“Thank you Dublin. That feels so much better.”

Bear then rose to his feet and moved his left arm in short circular motions.

“Not a hundred percent, but good enough for now. I’m ready.”

Reese, as he looked toward Cooper Wyse who was holding onto the four surviving horses, posed a question that had just come to him.

“Cooper, you bring that laser gun? The one you said could shoot down a drone?”

Cooper looked back at Reese and nodded.

“Yeah, got it strapped to the side of my horse.”

The other three Dominatus survivors were looking at Cooper Wyse with the same intensity as Reese was. Reese followed up with the question the four of them were all thinking.

“So...why didn't you use it to shoot that thing down Cooper?”

Cooper Wyse simply shrugged.

“Didn’t have time. I would have had to jump down from the horse, unstrapped the weapon, taken aim...we all could have been blown to bits by then.”

Mac stepped toward Cooper.

“You mean to tell me you couldn’t have shot that thing from your horse? As good a rider as you are, I find that hard to believe Coop. Real hard to believe.”

Cooper Wyse’s eyes glowered back at Mac from under the brim of his cowboy hat as his right hand lowered itself

slowly until it rested just above the holstered gun that hung from his right hip.

“Don’t care for the accusation Mac.”

Mac took another step toward Cooper.

“Why didn’t you fire that weapon at those drones Coop? You didn’t even try.”

The rancher’s right hand twitched slightly. He was prepared to shoot.

“It happened too fast Mac. Suppose you can say I panicked a bit. Hell, you didn’t think of using it either until Reese

just mentioned it. You're the soldier here, not me. If you want to keep talking like this, implicating me in something, then go on and do it and we'll have that discussion right here and now. Otherwise, you can shut the hell up about it. I'm the one who lost a horse. I'm the one who left my ranch to help you all out."

Mac continued to stare into Cooper's eyes, trying to determine if the man was being truthful or not. After several seconds passed, he relaxed his posture and held up both of his hands.

"You are right on that Coop, I should have been more ready. Guess I've

grown rusty since we left Dominatus. Too much city life. That said, let's make sure that laser gun of yours is ready to go in case we get visited by another one of those drones."

Cooper Wyse nodded his head in agreement.

"Absolutely."

The rancher then proceeded to lead the four horses deeper into the trees, calling back to the other four as he did so.

"Let's go then. The trees get real thick for a while, but we don't have much further to the cabin."

Mac kept himself between Cooper and the other three. Reese noted the former Navy SEAL had quietly removed his handgun from its shoulder holster and was carrying it in his right hand.

After twenty minutes of walking through the dense trees, the five came upon a clearing where a small cabin was situated at the opposite side a little more than a hundred yards away.

Cooper held up a hand to signal the other four to stop. He stood just inside the tree line staring across at the cabin as the others gathered behind him.

“Something’s not right. Brando should be here. He should be waiting for me right in front of the cabin like he always does.”

Dark clouds gathered above the trees as the temperature had become noticeably cooler than it was just an hour earlier. Rain was coming.

Mac, who had holstered his weapon, took out a set of binoculars and stood next to Cooper as he looked toward the cabin.

“Can’t see anyone in there but the windows are too dark to tell for certain. No movement though.”

The sound of Brando's bark echoed off of the trees behind them. The bark then turned to a growling yelp.

Cooper's eyes widened in alarm and he ran back into the woods, his gun already removed from its holster. The other four struggled to catch up to the rancher as the intensity of Brando's agitated growls increased. There was something in those woods the dog felt very threatened by.

Reese, Dublin, Mac, and Bear reached Cooper Wyse who was kneeling over Brando to make certain the Doberman was not harmed. Brando in turn stood

motionless, his eyes fixated somewhere inside the forest. The Doberman's lip curled back in a menacing snarl, his teeth snapping down hard as the dog continued to warn off whatever it thought was in the woods.

Mac stood with his gun drawn next to both Cooper and Brando as he peered into the trees trying to see what was bothering the dog so much.

“You see anything Coop?”

Cooper shook his head.

Large droplets of rain began to fall above them, though few actually made it

past the branches and to the ground, which remained almost completely dry.

Finally Brando's snarling barks began to lessen, and within a few more minutes, the dog was happily licking the side of Cooper's face.

Mac remained concerned over what had spooked the dog so much.

"He normally get that upset over something?"

Cooper stood up and looked into the woods again.

"No – he doesn't. Maybe he came

across a bear. That would do it.”

Dublin’s voice called out from behind the two men.

“Do you smell that Mac? Like...like something is rotten. Or dead.”

Mac, Cooper, Reese and Bear sniffed the air around them. Only Bear confirmed what Dublin was smelling.

“Yeah, like there’s something dead. Like that but...kind of different too.”

Cooper shrugged.

“Whatever it was seems to be gone

now. Let's get to the cabin."

The give made their way back to the clearing and looked out toward the small cabin. Brando sat to Cooper's right staring as intently across the clearing as everyone else. Cooper Wyse issued a short low whistle as he gave an abbreviated chopping motion with his right hand in the direction of the cabin.

"Go!"

Brando took off across the clearing and within seconds was circling and sniffing along the cabin's perimeter. After doing so twice the dog stopped in front of the cabin door and lay down, waiting for

Cooper and the others to join him.

Grabbing the four remaining horses, Cooper was the first to begin crossing the clearing. Reese and Dublin followed close behind the rancher, while Bear and Mac trailed slowly behind. Both Mac and Bear had drawn their weapons and were looking behind them and then into the sky above. The rain had lessened some, though the clouds indicated there was more to come.

“There was something not right in those woods Mac. I smelled it. Just like Dublin did. Had the dog freaking out whatever it was.”

Mac's eyes continued to scan upward as he responded to Bear.

“Could have been an animal of some sort, but I know what you mean. Coming off that hill I was feeling nervous. Then the drone attack and whatever was in those woods with us. Now we're stuck out here in the middle of wherever the hell this is, I don't much like not being in control of the situation.”

Bear looked ahead toward Cooper Wyse who was almost to the cabin.

“Yeah, wish we were all back in Dominatus.”

Mac gave a small smile as he looked over at Bear.

“Me too. I miss it every damn day. The tavern, the Old Man - all of it.”

All five now stood just outside the entrance to the cabin. Like Bear and Mac, the other three had unholstered their guns as Cooper removed a single key from a pocket and inserted it into the large padlock that sealed the front door shut. He returned the key to its pocket inside his vest and slowly pushed the door inward. Mac scanned the door and noted it looked to be far more heavy than it appeared from the outside.

“That thing steel?”

Cooper nodded.

“Half inch steel on the interior of the door. Not just the door – the whole cabin. Runs right in between the log framing, including the roof. The windows have a security laminate over them. Makes them bullet resistant. Come on in.”

As soon as the rancher stepped into the cabin's interior, two overhead lights came on. Cooper quickly turned behind the door to input a code into a small box attached to the wall.

“We have motion sensor lights, and a full on security system for not only the cabin, but once we are inside here, I can activate the perimeter sensors. Anything crosses the clearing and we’ll know about it.”

Mac pointed upward.

“How about if that drone comes back and drops a missile on top of us?”

Cooper glanced briefly at the other four.

“Nothing much we can do about that Mac. Drones aren’t allowed inside the Canadian territories – at least that’s my

understanding. We're far enough from the border now we should be ok."

Mac scoffed at Cooper's words.

"We're talking about the New United Nations. They'll do whatever the hell they want. If that means blowing us up inside this cabin, then that's what they'll do. We'll spend the night here, but first thing tomorrow we need to be on our way, wherever that is. I'll assume you had some idea of where we were going to go from here?"

Cooper Wyse looked out one of the windows of the cabin and then back to Mac.

“Expecting a visitor soon, the guy I’ve been working with for the last ten years or so. He brings in the goods, leaves them here at the cabin for me, and I take them across into Alaska. If anyone would know the best way for us to get all the way over to Manitoba it would be him.”

Reese moved next to Mac, speaking with the same growing sense of apprehension the other three Dominatus survivors now felt.

“This partner of yours, can he be trusted? Couldn’t he have been the one who tipped off the New United Nations

about when we were leaving? The one who helped send the drones after us?”

Cooper let out a long sigh and shook his head.

“I suppose that’s possible, yeah. Then again, I know this man better than I know any of you. He’s good people. I trust him - absolutely. Whether or not you trust him, or you trust me, that’s up to each of you. He’s no more a friend of the New United Nations than any of you. It would make no sense for him to give us up to them.”

“When is he supposed to be here?”

Bear's question remained unanswered as Cooper Wyse was again looking out a window at the four remaining horses he had tied up just outside the cabin. Finally he turned back to Bear.

“First thing tomorrow morning, he'll be walking in from the south end of the clearing. His name is Imran.”

Again it was Reese who voiced the concern the others felt.

“Imran? Is he Muslim? I thought you said the Muslims who took over Canada were to be avoided - the radicals, the killings, Sharia Law?”

“What I said was that the urban areas should be avoided. I didn’t say every Muslim in Canada was bad. Imran isn’t one of those radicals. In fact, I don’t ever recall him mentioning anything about religion. He’s just a businessman. No more. No less.”

Cooper’s response did nothing to lessen Bear’s agitation.

“This is bullshit Mac. We ain’t been out here a day and I’m almost blown to hell, and we are sitting around here waiting for some Muslim to arrive and show us where to go? That’s the plan?”

Before Mac could respond, Dublin

intervened.

“Stop it. Sooner or later we are going to have to trust each other. Either we do that, or we turn around and go back. I don’t want to do that. I’m not going to do that. So Mac, Bear, Reese...you need to decide if you are going to trust Mr. Wyse or if you want to give this up. I’m tired of this. Somebody obviously knew we were crossing those hills. Ok, fine. But that doesn’t mean Mr. Wyse had something to do with it, or that this Imran had something to do with it. Unless I get information that says otherwise, I’m not going to just sit here and accuse someone of something they didn’t do.”

Nobody spoke following Dublin's rant.

Then the perimeter alarm sounded.

Someone, or something, was outside.

IX.

For a man just over thirty years of age, Imran Senturk had done remarkably well for himself given the challenges of attempting to make one's way in a world gone mad under the rule of the New United Nations. Born in a small seaside village just outside of Antalya, Turkey,

Imran's family had enjoyed a reasonably comfortable existence due to his father's ownership of an apartment complex. Imran was well educated, enjoyed both his studies and sports, and was regarded by family and neighbors as a boy blessed with wisdom and insight beyond his years.

That life though was irrevocably altered shortly after his fourteenth birthday in the year 2020. That was the year when the Muslim Brotherhood consolidated its control of every aspect of Turkish politics and culture. Any who publicly opposed the takeover were jailed, or killed. For months, tens of thousands were put on trial, and brutal public

executions became a daily occurrence.

Soon after, government officials from the Sharia Compliance Office arrived at Imran's home, demanding his father no longer charge rent to any tenants who were members of the newly formed Sharia government. They returned days later to question not only Imran's father, but his mother, two sisters, and himself about their devotion to Islam, the books they read, the Internet sites they visited, and if they were willing to participate in what was described to them as the Global Jihad program.

Unknown to Imran's family, Turkish authorities had already been in

negotiations with leaders within the then emerging New United Nations. These negotiations were built upon a relationship that the then American president had forged with Sharia leaders inside Turkey years earlier - a relationship that had played a significant part in events involving Libya, Iran, Egypt, and Syria. Events that would eventually lead to Israel's near total isolation from all other nations by 2021.

The man who became the second in command at the New United Nations was Recep Tayyip Erdogan, Turkey's former Prime Minister. It was Erdogan who was given near absolute authority to crush any opposition to the New United

Nations throughout the Middle East, North Africa, and eventually, Europe.

In 2022, a vast immigration of Muslims into Canada was initiated by Erdogan's Sharia Compliance Office. It was this forced immigration that uprooted Imran's family from their village in Turkey and placed them in a massive government housing complex in Vancouver, British Columbia. Their neighbors within this complex were hundreds of other families from throughout the Middle East.

Just days after arriving in Vancouver, Imran's family was visited by yet more officers of the Sharia Compliance Office

and given direct instructions on how they were to be a part of a massive Islamic insurgency within Canada, an extension of the Global Jihad program they had been informed of already when still living in Turkey. Imran's father was promised a larger home as well as a possible position of authority within the Sharia Compliance Office of Vancouver if their work to help Sharia become the dominant authority throughout the area was done well.

Most of the newly transplanted Muslims, as well as Muslims already living in the city complied with the orders, and the streets of Vancouver were witness to repeated acts of brutality and chaos.

This chaos quickly spread to other cities throughout Canada – cities that also had seen a forced immigration of thousands upon thousands of radicalized Muslims.

Non-Muslims were the first to flee these cities, finding homes in the less urban areas of Canada. Then the moderate or non-practicing Muslims soon followed. What was left in those cities then were the most authoritarian Sharia Muslims who were allowed to rape and murder any who opposed them. The new global government did nothing to stop the carnage, but rather was the one to encourage that brutality.

The New United Nations had promised

Recep Erdogan vast nations within which he would be allowed to freely promulgate his Sharia Law beliefs. What happened in Canada was duplicated in Australia, Sweden, and Spain. These former nations then became places ruled by the most fanatical of Muslim warlords who in turn fought amongst themselves for further power and influence. The only condition placed upon these warlords by the New United Nations, was that they supplied the global government with the very things it had banned throughout the world - things ranging from the fossil fuels that powered the airliners that only the ruling class within the New United Nations could use, to the drugs

government officials had declared immoral while they themselves consumed them in ever increasing quantities.

Canada had become a brutal and dangerous place, and it had been Imran's home for the last seventeen years of his life. His father and mother were dead, the location of his siblings, if still alive, long unknown to him. Imran had come to quietly support a growing movement within both Canada and the United States by those that had once called themselves citizens of those former governments, to overthrow the tyranny of the New United Nations. He had begun to cross the border into what had once been the state

of Alaska to trade goods with others like himself who hoped to do the same. It was during one of those trips he had met a man some had taken to calling the Irish Cowboy – Cooper Wyse. Like Imran, Cooper had also been looking for a way to help others obtain things needed to defy the authority of the New United Nations. The two men had been working together for nearly a decade now. It was to the drop cabin they both used to deliver goods from Canada into Alaska that Imran now found himself walking toward. This time though, Cooper had told him they would be delivering the goods from Alaska into Canada, and Imran's help was needed to make that happen as quickly, quietly, and safely as

possible.

So lost was he in his thoughts about how he would go about accomplishing Cooper's request, as well as the difficulty in seeing more than a few feet around him due to the darkness, that Imran failed to notice the large figure that loomed behind him with a gun pointed to his head.

“Don't you move little man. Stay right there.”

Imran's hand instinctively reached for his own weapon holstered inside his jacket.

“Don’t want to do that. Keep your hands where I can see them or your brains will be outside your head a lot faster than you can reach for whatever you’re reaching for.”

Imran could see the outline of the cabin some fifty or so yards ahead, though no light was on inside. He found that odd given Cooper had indicated to him earlier they were to have arrived by now.

“You got a name little man?”

Imran held both his hands up and asked if he could turn around slowly. As he did so he heard two more people

approaching from his right.

“No turning around. I asked you if you have a name.”

“Yes, but might I ask who you are as well? I am not accustomed to meeting uninvited guests out here. What is your purpose my friend?”

Imran could hear two more approaching from his left as well. He was surrounded.

Then he felt something nudge his crotch.

X.

“Brando! Here!”

The Doberman immediately responded to Cooper’s order, sprinting away from Imran and sitting to Cooper’s right.

Imran felt a wave of relief at the sound of Cooper Wyse’s voice.

“Glad to know it is you old friend. And hello to Brando as well of course!”

To his left, Imran could now clearly see Cooper, along with a very large, bearded man. To Imran’s right were three others – an older man with short

cropped grey hair and glasses, and another man in his late thirties or early forties of medium height and build standing close to an attractive dark brown haired woman of similar age.

“What are you doing here already? Any trouble?”

Imran smiled to each of the four others before responding to Cooper.

“Trouble...yes. Always trouble. Can we perhaps go inside Cooper?”

Cooper Wyse turned and began walking back toward the cabin as Brando sprinted ahead in front. Imran followed

as the four others fell in behind him.

Once inside the small cabin, Imran again smiled at the others. He was again silently shocked at how large the bearded man was.

“Imran, these four come from Alaska. This is Mac, Bear, Dublin, and Reese. Like my message to you said, we need some help getting across the territories and I figured you would be able to provide that help. Thanks for showing up, even if you getting here early put a bit of a spook in us.”

Imran's dark, rounded face fell in upon itself with regret.

“Oh, I apologize. It was...it became necessary you see. Tomorrow...restrictions have been put in place. Travel is being regulated. There is a threat. Rumors of an invasion by Muslims.”

Bear's eyes narrowed as he listened intently to Imran's explanation of his early arrival.

“Muslims? Ain't you one of them? A Muslim?”

The much smaller man glanced nervously toward Bear.

“No, I’m Christian! My family, yes, we came from Turkey, but I am not a Muslim. I would not be allowed to live in the outpost...Fort Wilfrid. The godfather has very little tolerance for Muslims, for Islam. He barely tolerates any religion really.”

Mac, Bear, Reese, and Dublin all turned to look at Cooper. Mac was the first to pose a question.

“What the hell is he going on about Coop? What is Fort Wilfrid? Who or what is the godfather, and what is this about some invasion?”

Cooper Wyse looked over to Imran and

then back to Mac.

“Fort Wilfrid is where Imran lives. It’s about a hundred miles from here give or take. Slow going getting there though, especially in the colder months, which up here, is most the year. The godfather is the name of the guy who started up the whole place – Fort Wilfred. He’s been out there for about fifteen years or so. Been told he’s a bit different, but as far as how things are done in Canada, about as good as you’re gonna get. And Imran’s right. From what I understand, the godfather can’t stand Muslims. So in a way, he’s a big part of keeping them out of Alaska. And I’m serious there, if they were allowed to just walk in and

take over, that's what those Muslims would do. Nasty bunch. At least the ones I've run into, which admittedly hasn't been much because I tend to try and avoid that kind of trouble whenever possible. In fact, don't think I've been as far out as Wilfrid in almost two years now."

Mac pressed Cooper for more answers.

"Ok, but what about this invasion thing he's talking about?"

Cooper shook his head and shrugged.

"I don't know anything about that. Imran, tell us what you mean by

invasion.”

Imran’s eyes grew large as both hands flew out in front of him.

“Yes! An invasion! There are rumors, many rumors of late. From the East. A large Muslim force sent to destroy Wilfrid and then enter Alaska. They wish to overtake Alaska! And so soon after you defeated the New United Nations! With so much resistance to their authority elsewhere, the Texas Resistance...instead of using resources to do it themselves, it is said the New United Nations is telling the Muslim warlords they can have Alaska.”

Bear took a step toward Imran, his right hand reaching out to grasp the front of the much smaller man's winter jacket.

“Bullshit! That can't happen!”

Brando exposed his teeth and snarled at Bear, warning him to release Imran.

“Goddammit! What is with that stupid dog?”

Cooper Wyse stepped between Brando and Bear, and gently pulled Imran out of Bear's grasp.

“He knows Imran better than he knows you Bear, and it looks to him like a real

big guy picking on a little guy and Brando don't like that much - nothing personal.”

Bear pivoted toward Cooper, looked down at Brando glaring at him, and thought better of it.

Dublin spoke up, wanting to return the subject to the threatened invasion of Alaska.

“Imran, do you think these rumors are credible? Is the invasion something that could actually happen?”

Imran nodded his head enthusiastically.

“Oh yes! The godfather would not be doubling the defensive personnel, or imposing travel restrictions, if they were not credible. Such restriction harms trade, and trade is how we all...that is what the economy up here is based upon. I have seen Muslim groups with my own eyes, just outside Wilfrid, traveling in vehicles. And just the other day, I and some others saw an armed drone fly overhead. That has not been seen in years due to the agreement between the New United Nations and the Muslim warlords that there is to be no drones inside of the former Canadian provinces.”

Dublin looked at Mac.

“That might explain the drone that tried to kill us Mac. Maybe they are trying to prepare the area for the invasion. If the New United Nations is helping out these Muslims to invade Alaska, that’s something that needs to be taken very seriously.”

Reese added his own thoughts.

“That drone that came at us, that was for us specifically. It wasn’t a random thing that happened related to this possible invasion scenario. The timing was too good. They knew where we were. It came right for us. Somehow somebody, somewhere – it was no accident. That

said, if there's some radical Muslim group wanting to march on into Alaska and they're getting help from the New United Nations, Dublin is right, we need to do something.”

Bear's fist slammed against the wall behind him.

“We need to get back to Alaska and help prepare to defend it! I need to protect my kids. My wife. No fucking Muslim scum are gonna threaten my family. There's no way---“

Mac cut Bear off.

“We are doing something Bear. We're

doing something that might bring this whole globalist government down. That's what we agreed to do. That's why we are out here. That's why we are going to keep going until we get to that priest. I can contact the Alaskan militia, Franklin Thomas. Let him know what Imran just told us here. I'm sure they can handle themselves fine against a bunch of Muslims even if there are a few drones helping them out. My guess is the New United Nations is actually using these Muslims as a test run to see just how good Alaska's defenses really are before they send in the serious firepower. Well, I've personally helped prepare those defenses. We got all kinds of anti-aircraft, even some tanks and a

few naval vessels that are back up and running. Your wife and kids are as safe as anyone can be right now in this world, I promise you that.”

Imran whispered a warning to all of them.

“Not just drones. Other weapons. Other...things.”

Cooper leaned in to better hear what Imran was saying.

“What was that Imran? What other weapons? You mean missiles, tanks, that kind of thing?”

Imran's dark eyes looked through a window to the blackness outside.

“People are saying they have seen things. Creatures. Shadows of things. And that they are somehow linked to the New United Nations. A kind of experiment. Genetic manipulation. They are making...monsters. I have heard the godfather speak of it from time to time. He says the globalists are playing God, turning the unborn into something else. The population controls, the millions of abortions, some of it is being used to create things no longer human.”

Mac waived away Imran's story of

creatures born from New United Nations genetic experiments.

“What the hell is this bullshit Coop? Your guy here shows up early, in the dark, so he can tell us about some Muslim invasion of Alaska and people seeing monsters running around that are some kind of...what? New genetic weapon of some sort? What's his game? He trying to get us afraid enough to turn tail and just head back home? You keep talking like this and I'm gonna let Bear take his frustration out on you boy. You see how agitated he is? That's a hell of a lot of hurt he's ready to lay on someone and you're getting real close to being on the receiving end of that.”

Reese held up his hand to get the others' attention.

“I don't know if what Imran is saying is the truth or not, but I do know, back in Dominatus, Dr. Miller told me about fetuses being used for experiments. That all of the abortions helped provide the resources for these kinds of experiments. He didn't say anything about genetic weapons, but is that really so far fetched given what we know about the New United Nations? It could be true. Imran, do these things, these weapons...do they have a name?”

Imran's eyes were still focused on the

murky blanket of night just outside the window as he uttered his response.

“Seekers.”

XI.

The man who had once been President of the United States was not mad. So he told himself over and over again in the cavernous confines of his private residence atop the massive New United Nations building in New York. It was inside this residence the Great Consulate had remained for the last seven years, locked away from the world outside, his

only human visitor being his personal assistant what's his name. The Great Consulate could not recall names anymore, not even his own. So too were the memories of faces of those he knew now fading into some distant past within the tightly locked rooms of a mind long ago past its expiration date.

But he was not mad. So he told himself...over and over again.

The skin had gone an ashen grey. Almost inhuman in appearance, and covered in open, oozing sores that filled the rooms of the residence with an odd, fetid stench, that skin hung off the Great Consulate's skeletal frame, gathered in

layers of loose fitting wrinkles around the neck, elbows, and knees. For many years he had taken to wearing a single garment of clothing, a once pristine white toga that was soon after stained dark from the remains of his own bodily functions and the blood of himself and others. The toga was an idea he formed after watching an old film titled *Caligula* that became a favorite of the Great Consulate's years ago when he entertained the idea of calling himself Emperor of Earth. That idea eventually faded – but the toga remained.

What little food he ate was left for him by the assistant. Once a week the large open bowls in the kitchen were

restocked with the candy corn that had become the Great Consulate's favorite in more recent years. These candies had been banned by the New United Nations health mandates of course, which in his mind, made the taste all the better. He ate those candies by the hundreds every day.

The greatest pleasure though, besides the killing, was the cigarettes. Like the candies, tobacco had long ago been outlawed. The Great Consulate had crates of cigarettes stored in entire rooms of his residence. Empty cartons lay strewn about, the ashes of the tens of thousands of smoked cigarettes giving the floors of the residence the

appearance of an ever moving, dust-cloud carpet. His lips had become a deep yellow-purple and paper thin from the years of smoking, and due to malnutrition, his once glorious white dental implants had long ago fallen out leaving only blackened gums that had receded to the point of near extinction.

But he was not mad. So he told himself...over and over again.

Trembling, bone-thin, nicotine stained fingers reached out to scoop up several more candy corns. He let them sit in his mouth and dissolve across his painful, abscessed gums. The familiar taste made the Great Consulate grin, as a line

of sugar-sweetened drool hung from the right corner of his mouth. His left hand, his dominant hand, brought yet another burning cigarette to his mouth from which he took a long, deep, satisfying drag. As the smoke entered his one remaining lung, the Great Consulate closed his eyes and snickered.

Cigarettes and candy corn. What more could one want, or ever need?

“Killing. Don’t forget the killing. You have the power of life and death over all things.”

His right hand brushed his groin, the area where the tools of his gender had

once resided. Three years ago, in a fit of deep depression and self-loathing, the Great Consulate had mutilated himself in this very room. The by then familiar voice in his head had convinced him of his superior nature. He was no mere human being. No...he was truly a god. Something beyond human, something far better - more evolved. At least he would be, so long as he was willing to remove the evidence of his gender specific humanity. And so, after days of no sleep, no food or drink, the Great Consulate concurred with the advice of this wise voice. He took a simple butter knife from the kitchen and proceeded over the course of several hours, to remove his manhood, leaving only

tattered and bleeding remnants from which no reformation was possible. It had proven difficult, though ultimately gratifying work.

The assistant found the Great Consulate three days later, passed out on the floor of the main room, his toga balled up between his legs drenched in the blood and torn skin of his mutilation. By the time he was discovered, the area had already become infected - the act almost killing the man who once called himself by a name he no longer remembered. For a week the Great Consulate of the New United Nations lay in the medical room housed inside the residence, as the most powerful antibiotics available

were pumped into his body. The gaping slash that was his groin was cleaned and stitched, with a small plastic straw-like tube left exposed just outside his skin to allow him to urinate.

Upon waking, and seeing the results of what that voice in his head had demanded he do, the Great Consulate openly declared himself a god to his assistant and the medical nurse overseeing his recovery. He shouted constantly during this recovery, exclaiming he had finally been freed from the chains of gender slavery, and this freedom was certain to make him an even far more effective leader.

“Let me be clear! No longer am I merely a man...or a woman. I am much-much more than that now! I am the future of all humanity. I am what everyone will soon aspire to be! Where I have now gone – others will follow. It will be mandated they do so!”

But he was not mad. So he told himself...over and over again.

Shuffling to one of the towering, dark-curtained windows, the Great Consulate pushed a simple black button on the wall and watched as the curtains slowly opened to reveal the world outside the New United Nations complex. The East River flowed slowly nearly three

thousand feet below him. His toothless black gummed smile spread widely across his sunken, desiccated face as he watched the hundreds of drones flying across the Manhattan skyline. The drones had always made him feel safe. Powerful. Invincible.

There was that trouble in Alaska two years ago though. He had read the reports delivered to him by the assistant whose name he continued to forget. That place called Dominatus. The one Alexander David Meyer had created years ago when the Great Consulate was still consolidating his power throughout the world. The deals with the Saudis. The expansion of the International

Monetary Fund. The collapse of the American dollar. The dissolution of Congress. Oh how the man who had called himself...something. Oh how he missed those now long ago days.

There would yet be more good days to come. Yes indeed. More drones. Texas was acting out. Fucking Texas. Always trouble. Always refusing to comply. You thought they would have learned after Waco. No. They were too...misinformed. They just didn't understand. Like Alaska two years ago, the Great Consulate was now reading the reports on this pathetic Texas Resistance. Was it a few thousand? Ten thousand? Twenty? It wouldn't

matter. They would all be dead soon. The drones were being assembled. The weapons. The power of the New United Nations. His power. The power of a god. The power of the only one true god, for that is what he was.

“Kill them all. Every one of them. Make them understand. Your power is absolute. Your power is and always will be. You are their god. They must come to understand and accept this truth.”

The voice of wisdom had recently returned to the Great Consulate, and he found himself seeking its guidance more and more. But what of those survivors

of Dominatus? They are inside Canada now. We aren't allowed to send drones after them there. Not officially anyways. What should be done with them? What are they up to? Why have they left Alaska? Do they intend to come here? For me?

The Great Consulate laughed out loud at the absurdity of such a thing. No-one or anything could harm him. Not here. Not with all of his beloved drones protecting him outside.

“That's right. You are not like them. You are more than them. All of them. Make them understand. Unleash your pets. Watch it being done through their

eyes. Only a god could do such a thing. Only you can do such a thing, because you and you alone are GOD.”

Another deep inhalation of heavily drenched nicotine laced smoke entered the Great Consulate's lung. The voice was right. The voice was always right. Yes. And the seeing always excited him. Though nothing was left where once his gender resided, he still sensed excitement down there when the thought of the watching came to him. He had been watching those four from Alaska. The drone had almost killed them on the border. Almost. He was able to watch the attack through the seeker's eyes. Now they sat inside some cabin.

Waiting for something perhaps? It didn't matter. He would send more. More and more he would send until there was enough to kill them all, and he would be able to watch it being done. Watch it. See it. Feel it. Taste it.

“Yes! You can do all of that – and more. So bring your seekers to that cabin. Bring enough so that you can kill them all. Do it. Do it. Do it.”

The Great Consulate nodded as he continued to look across the East River and to his beloved drones. The voice was right. The voice was always right. But first...first he needed time in his killing room. Yes...there must always

be time for that. The thought made him giggle as his hand once again brushed against his decimated groin.

But he was not mad. So he told himself...over and over again.

XII.

The four survivors of Dominatus, along with Cooper Wyse, and Cooper's associate Imran, settled into the cramped interior of the drop cabin. Imran had brought food as a gift, a tradition he had learned long ago from his own family back in Turkey - never arrive as a guest

without giving something in appreciation.

The six sat on the floor eating dried fruit and strips of well seasoned caribou jerky, washing it all down with cool water from Imran's large thermos. It was, all things considered, a reasonably good meal.

Imran asked more than once if they found the jerky acceptable. Bear had consumed several large strips of it in the span of just a few minutes, and clapped the little man on the back, sending his upper body forward toward the floor.

“Good stuff Imran! You come from

Turkey, huh? Well then, I'm gonna call this Turkey-jerky, and it's good! Keep it coming!"

Imran smiled widely at the compliment and offered Bear the final strip, which Bear quickly swiped and devoured, more than living up to his long-standing nickname.

Reese studied Imran carefully, waiting to proceed with a series of questions he wanted answered. Finally, after the last of the jerky and dried fruit was gone, and a moment of silence hung between all of them, those questions were posed to the newest member of the group.

“Imran, do you mind if I ask you some things?”

Imran glanced over to Cooper, who said nothing, before he looked back at Reese.

“I would be honored Mr. Neeson. You are...you are well known to me and many others. So many of us listened to your words from Dominatus during the attacks. Please ask me anything and I will do my best to answer you.”

Reese paused for a moment, gathering his thoughts.

“You...your family was part of the forced Muslim migration into Canada,

right?”

Imran nodded his agreement without speaking.

“What was the purpose of this migration? Why is it that the New United Nations left Canada alone – that it wasn’t required to follow the mandates? I’ve heard some explanation of that before, but you experienced it first hand. I want to know your version of it.”

Imran appeared to hesitate for a brief moment, his eyes glancing at the floor. Then he returned Reese’s gaze and held it before proceeding.

“What was once Canada is following the mandates of the New United Nations, just a different version of them. Canada is rich with resources the globalists need. Fuel, coal, wood, and chaos. Chaos...it is the threat of chaos that keeps so many in the former United States in line. Years ago, just after the American president was made the Great Consulate, a series of videos were released by the government controlled news agencies showing beheadings happening in Canada. Do you recall those? I was barely a young man by then, but I remember them very well. They were very graphic, very brutal. These beheadings were carried out by

newly transplanted residents into Canada, radicals who followed Sharia. It was said they were punishing their own, and so that was, at first. But then...then they were shown punishing white Canadians. People who were alleged to have done an injustice to Muslims. Do you recall this?"

Reese nodded. He had witnessed the brutality of the beheadings from numerous media reports, as well as recalling the panic it created within the former United States and throughout parts of Europe where the Muslim threat was by then even more significant.

Imran continued.

“And while the New United Nations condemned these beheadings, it did nothing to stop them. Nothing. In fact, some have said they were the ones ordering those terrible acts. They were the ones who disseminated the videos to the media. They created the threat of Muslim radicals, they promised to protect the millions who remained inside the borders of the former United States. You see, it was said that only the New United Nations had the power to stop the Muslim threat – but it was the New United Nations that created that threat in the first place!”

“But why is the Canadian Black Market

allowed to flourish in direct violation of the mandates? Why would the New United Nations powers allow that to happen?”

Reese’s question brought a smile from Imran’s face as he pointed to Mac.

“Mr. Walker, you were military, yes? For many years? And some of those years were spent throughout the Middle East, correct?”

Mac gave one brief nod but said nothing.

“And what did you see? Who...who was so often in power in that part of the world? Was it the official government,

or was it someone or something else? If you needed access through an area, through a town, who did you set that up with? Say in Pakistan, or Iraq...or Libya?"

Mac glanced at Reese, and then stared back at Imran.

"If we were among hostiles, we had to coordinate with the local warlords. The clerics, the generational families who controlled the land – people like that. They were scum, dangerous, but would take money, or promises of weapons, whatever. As long as they allowed us access, or a window of time, that's all we cared about."

Imran's eyes narrowed slightly as he paused, wanting Mac to take his answer just a little further.

“And who Mr. Walker, who funded these warlords as you call them? So often, where did that money come from? Who provided them weapons? Who further consolidated their power?”

‘Besides the United States government?’

Mac's comment held no humor – he wasn't joking.

Imran nodded again, his smile returning.

“Yes! Besides the Americans, who funded so many of these groups? These very people you described as dangerous, as scum?”

Mac covered his mouth with his right hand and coughed, then cleared his throat. He appeared to be very, very tired. Brando's head was on his lap as the former Navy SEAL's left hand gently scratched behind the Doberman's ears.

“Most the money, if you followed the trail, which our people did from time to time, most the money came from the Saudis. Millions here. Millions there. Sometimes hundreds of millions or even billions. More than enough to buy up

huge sections of countries. Take Afghanistan for instance. The Saudis didn't much bother with the capital of Kabul. Let the Afghan government pretend to run things there, but the Saudis controlled just about everything else. In a country of thirty million or so people, the Saudi influence dominated at least two thirds of them. You had thirty-four Afghan provinces. The Saudis had at least twenty, maybe thirty of them bought and paid for. And all that money the U.S. government was sending to Kabul to prop up the national government? The Saudis were taking their cut of that as well. They would turn right around and dump that money back into the other provinces - using

American tax dollars to buy up weapons and resistance to use against the American military. It was one huge, pathetic cluster-fuck.”

“And was this arrangement, it was common throughout the Middle East, yes?”

Mac nodded slowly as his eyes closed.

“Yeah, sure. Iraq after Saddam was gone. Egypt after Mubarak was forced out. Libya after Gaddafi. Same thing. The power vacuum was always replaced by an increased Saudi presence. They used the Muslim Brotherhood to do a lot of it. That’s what so many people

missed. The Brotherhood connection. Or they didn't want it pointed out because the Brotherhood had such close ties inside the American government.”

Reese opened his mouth to speak, hesitated, then went ahead and posed another question.

“I thought the Muslim Brotherhood was banned in Saudi Arabia? I recall reports indicating the two groups, the Brotherhood and the Saudi Royal Family, didn't trust each other.”

Mac chuckled.

“Sure, that's what the media repeated to

everyone and anyone who would ask. Not that many did. Most people back then if you asked them about the Muslim Brotherhood would have had no idea who they were. None. Too busy tweeting about nonsense to pay attention to their world destroyed all around them.

Fact is, the founder of the Brotherhood was a guy named Hassan al-Banna. I seen the file myself on him. Back in the 1940's he was going back and forth from Egypt to Saudi Arabia regularly. Getting funding for the Brotherhood. From the very beginning the Saudi Royal Family was using the Brotherhood to create disruption, chaos, all the things that drove up the price of oil and made them

wealthier than anyone else in the world. Trillions of dollars of wealth. Even we couldn't figure out how much money they had. It was so well hidden, transfers from one government to another, ghost corporations, media groups, the environmental movement...people a lot better at that stuff than me would go through it all and come back with "inconclusive". It was impossible to figure out just how much money they really had, but it was a hell of a lot. More than the U.S. government had. Talking real money here, not the fake shit we were printing off for decades before it all came crashing down.

Now this thing was a long time coming.

The Saudis, the Brotherhood...it was decades and decades of work and then after 2008, everything was accelerated. I didn't know it at the time, but looking back on it all, I see then that 2008 was when they pushed the real go button on all of it. We saw Egypt fall, Libya, Syria, the unrest in Turkey, the back and forth in Iraq and Iran, all of the crap in Europe, and eventually, it came to the United States and Canada. The Saudis sat back and watched all the years of planning, all the money invested...it all just fell into place for them. That sound about right Imran?"

Imran nodded again, though with no enthusiasm this time. His eyes held a

deep sadness as the memories of his family's forced relocation to Canada swept over him.

“Yes. The Brotherhood, it had become the most powerful group in Turkey. Openly hostile to everyone else. You were...you were either with them or you were not. There was no in between. It was them who organized the re-location to Canada and as Mac has said...the Brotherhood in turn was sponsored by the Saudis. The Saudis promised the Brotherhood vast lands, such as Canada, Australia...so long as the Brotherhood in turn provided a market by which the wealthy and powerful could continue to enjoy certain things...products, that had

become outlawed under the mandates. They worked in conjunction with the political leaders of that time who were open to such an arrangement. I saw that myself as a young man here in Canada. Local officials would simply look away as crimes were committed. Murders. Chaos. Until eventually, that chaos overtook the entire system. The new powers...the New United Nations, needed a Black Market that allowed them access to the very resources that it had banned the use of by the general population. No more can a private citizen travel by plane to another location. They must remain in a designated area where they can more easily be monitored, yes? But who is

allowed to travel across the world if they so choose? The ruling class. The New United Nations. The Saudis. And where is the fuel obtained for those planes? From the Black Markets of Canada and elsewhere. And that Black Market has made more wealth for those who had already been wealthy. Real wealth. Not the fake New United Nations credits. Ban the use of oil and what happens to it? It becomes that much more valuable as it becomes that much more limited. The Saudis knew this long ago. That is what has happened to every resource.”

Brando's head suddenly lifted from Mac's lap. The Doberman stared

intently through a window to the outside for a moment, before lowering his head again and drifting back to sleep.

Mac too was staring off through the window as his voice seemed to come from some place very far away inside himself.

“We gave it all away. Bit by bit until there was nothing left of what it once was. Nobody cared. Nobody was paying attention.”

Dublin reached over to lightly touch Mac’s left leg.

“What did we give away Mac?”

Mac looked over at Dublin and appeared to almost smile, but then his gaze returned to the outside.

“America. Our way of life. We didn’t realize...not all of us anyway. Didn’t realize how many others in the world wanted to destroy us because of what we had. Namely what we had was freedom and opportunity. It just didn’t sink in how good we had it, you know? Nobody wanted to admit the possibility that somebody could be elected president who actually hated what the country stood for. Hated the United States. Most of you are too young to remember that time. The political

correctness. How anyone who opposed what the government was doing – how they were called racist. Stupid. Crazy. Eventually, the government would just come in and arrest them. Send them to a re-education facility. Wasn't long before nobody was willing to talk out. Everybody just kept their heads down and didn't say anything. Lots of talking going on of course...about the weather, about some new reality program on the TV, but for all that talking going on – nobody was actually saying anything.”

Cooper Wyse, who had been sitting silently listening intently to the conversation, finally spoke up.

“That would explain the immigration push. And not just what happened in Canada with the radical Muslims, and what happened in the United States. How all those people were brought in from places that didn’t speak out against the governments they came from, right? Think about it – if you want to bring down America, what better way to do that than bring in a bunch of voters that either hate America already, or can’t be bothered to try and save something they don’t really understand or would miss if it’s gone?”

Mac snapped his fingers and pointed to Cooper.

“There you go Coop, right on the money there. And if you would have said anything like that say back in 2010 or 2014, you’d have been run out as a crazy racist son-of-a-bitch. When in fact, what you’re saying is all about saving America. What you just said there about the immigration thing is absolutely right. Makes sense now, don’t it? Why those big government liberal types were so big on open borders and bringing in anyone and anything that hated America. No need to take over America, or try to openly destroy it, when you can just sit back and watch it eat itself up from the inside.”

Bear shook his head with disgust.

“Like a cancer.”

Mac gave a pained smile at Bear’s comment, followed by a barely heard whispered response.

“Yeah, like a damn cancer.”

XIII.

The Great Consulate was whining in anticipation of the time soon to be spent in his killing room. A new seeker had been delivered to him just yesterday, and it was a beautiful specimen. Stronger

than the earlier versions. The lab was getting better at producing them. Thousands of aborted fetuses went into the creation of each successfully engineered seeker. The Great Consulate did not think in terms of cost though. He had long been an advocate of forced abortion. The general population could not be trusted to take care of such things themselves. Food and water resources for them were limited, so therefore, the population must remain at a constant. That was simply a fact, and it was up to the government to enforce that fact. In doing so, if hundreds of thousands of unwanted lives were terminated in the process, so be it.

Oh but the seekers! What a wonderful and brilliant creation were they! And of his own DNA too! Years ago the New United Nations had obtained documents from a former program originally initiated by the communist government in China. They too had utilized the genetic material from their own long-standing forced abortion program. They had not the science then to accomplish what it took the New United Nations Department of Genetic Engineering but a few years to do – the creation of life!

“You are a god, that is what ultimately made the program such a success. It was your DNA that proved the final component to creating the Seekers. You

are God. The only true God.”

Yes! The voice was right of course. He was God. There was no distinction between where his life as a mere human began, and where the realization of his divinity began. They had always been one and the same. Senator. President. Emperor. God. All one from the same. That is what he was, what he had always been. What he would forever be.

Let all those others live in their world of politics and posturing. He was beyond all of that now. He had always been beyond all of that. Better than all of that. Greater than all of that. He was the Alpha and Omega of this world. He was

its beginning, and if he chose, its end as well. Just as he was the beginning and end of the billions of lives that lived under the supervision of the New United Nations.

“They don’t allow you to leave here though. They think they can control you. They use you. There are rumors you have gone mad. That you are becoming a problem for them. You must be ready to act. Ready to eliminate them. Replace them. They cannot be trusted. None of them. They think they own you. Do they own you?”

NO! You do not own a god!

The Great Consulate's mind struggled to recall who these people were the voice was now speaking to him about. There was a time when he lived as a man. He worried over his place in the world. How others perceived him. He wanted money, power, influence, but resented all those who he needed the approval of to get those things. He recalled his hatred of America. Its arrogant imperialism. The stupidity of its people. Others would help him to eliminate that arrogance from the world. Realign it to its proper place. Make it merely one of many instead of one over many others. And so that was done. He played his part well. He read the words given to him. He acquired money,

power, and influence.

But it was not enough. Those things would have been enough for a mere man, but he was God. And what more proof of that was his creating of life from death? To take death ripped from the womb of a woman, and mix it with his own divine DNA, and from that, create the most beautiful life! Life that served him without question. Life that allowed him to see the world from the eyes of those he created! The seekers were his children. Literally, his children. His beautiful, unquestioning children, and someday soon, these children would inherit the earth. A gift from their genetic father. From their god.

The Great Consulate's head nodded rapidly in the darkness of his residence as he inhaled deeply from another cigarette.

“Yesssss, that is the one true plan worthy of your greatness. Eliminate all of them who are not of you. They are not worthy of this place. Only your children. Only they should remain.”

The Great Consulate knew it was time for the killing room now. He could wait no longer. And why should he wait. Gods wait for nothing!

As he walked down a long narrow

hallway the Great Consulate defecated onto the floor of the residence, giving no thought to it as he did so. The results of that defecation and a trail of tobacco smoke were the only things that followed behind him.

His mind recaptured earlier moments from his killing room. Initially he had the old and weak brought in. People who had already been classified as deceased by the health care system he had created years ago that had greatly helped to collapse the old government. These first examples still clung to life and enough awareness that they knew what was happening to them.

The Great Consulate would have them strapped tightly to the floor of the killing room, but not so much that they could not move a little. Just enough to allow them to struggle without posing any threat. Just enough to make it all the more... exciting

“Remember that old man who nearly killed you? The Vietnam veteran? Do you remember? He was so strong! Near death, and yet so strong!”

The Great Consulate did remember that time years ago shortly after he first ordered the construction of his killing room. The man was over eighty years old, with a failing heart. Like the others

before him he had been sedated, but somehow, he awoke enough to attack the Great Consulate, his surprisingly still strong hands choking him until he nearly passed out. If not for the man's greatly weakened heart giving up completely, that veteran of the Vietnam War may have actually killed him.

“But you can't actually kill a god, right? Isn't that right?”

Was the voice now mocking him? No, it knew better than to do such a thing. Didn't it?

The hidden panel to the killing room was now directly ahead. The Great

Consulate was sweating slightly, despite the residence's temperature control being set to just fifty eight degrees. The long walk down the hallway from the main room had left him winded. In addition to having just one lung, he was seventy eight years old. His weekly cocktail injections of antivirals and super antioxidants given to him by his personal assistant had managed so far to hinder the progression of serious disease, but even the medical enhancements available only to the higher ranking members of the New United Nations and its partners were having an increasingly difficult time keeping the Great Consulate healthy. Whispers of his imminent death had

become so common those other members within the massive global government had begun to prepare for the inevitable. They were already well aware of his limited mental capacity. The physical decline was likely soon to follow.

Touching his hand to the wall where a scanning device was hidden, the Great Consulate's diseased mouth grinned widely as the panel silently opened. Allowing a moment for his eyes to adjust to the light inside the twelve by twelve room, the Great Consulate looked lovingly into the large dark eyes of the seeker staring back at him.

The creature let out an angry hiss and

fought against its bonds. Each of the seeker's arms and legs were strapped down by a thin metallic wire that would painfully cut into its skin if it were to struggle too aggressively. Small pools of dark blood had already formed around the thing, having repeatedly pulled against its bonds already.

The Great Consulate ordered the seeker to be still as he closed the panel behind him. He was now alone in the small room with one of his beloved, scientifically created children. To the Great Consulate's right, hanging from the wall, was a set of eye glasses with a strap that could secure them tightly onto his head. These glasses, though simple

in appearance, were as complicated a piece of technology as could be found in the entire New United Nations. They were a direct sensory link into the seekers. All the Great Consulate need do was input a particular seeker's code into one of the screened lenses, and the glasses would locate the signal being sent from the transmitter that was housed around the brain stem of every seeker created. The Great Consulate had all of the codes for all of his seekers – nearly five hundred of them.

The sensory link was a relatively new device. While all seekers were given transmitters, the ability to actually see and smell and feel what they did came

later with an updated version – a version that was the result of the Great Consulate's repeated demands he be able to experience his children in the most intimate way, by seeing and sensing the world through them. And while their numbers were at present limited, soon the Great Consulate intended to have hundreds of thousands of seekers crawling across the globe, doing his bidding, and allowing him to experience every detail, ever moment as they did so. It would make the Great Consulate truly omnipotent. He would be the god he knew himself to be, and his power would be unquestioned by even his most assertive detractors.

“That’s right. Some of them have turned on you. Some of them think you have served a purpose that expired long ago. That you are to be kept in this place alone, away from the world. Away from them. But it was you who made this world. They must be made to know your power. Your divinity. Your transformation. They must be made to pay for their insolence. All of them. Kill all of them.”

The seeker hissed again at the Great Consulate, straining against its bonds enough to cause further bleeding from its wounds. The creature did not yet understand. The Great Consulate felt no anger toward the thing’s agitation. In

fact, it made the moment that much more enjoyable for him, as he would experience the agitation, the fear, the pain, first hand. Such was the technology of the sensory link.

He placed the glasses onto his face and secured them tightly around his head. The lenses were activated by an automatic retina scan – only he could use this particular device. As soon as the scan was completed, the lenses went temporarily dark, and then...it happened. The Great Consulate found himself looking at himself, seeing the world through the eyes of the imprisoned seeker, through the eyes of his own creation, his own genetically

manufactured child.

A wave of dizziness overcame him. This was normal and would soon pass as his own senses detached from himself and were replaced by those of the seeker.

What a thing it was. To smell his own humanity before him. The urine and fecal matter was almost overwhelming, disgustingly fascinating. He could see every pore of his own skin, how ashen it had become. The deterioration of the musculature. The bend in the spine. The sunken face. The yellow purple lips. The diseased gums.

“You are beautiful. Beyond human,

much more than human. A god. The one true god.”

He sensed the seeker’s own confusion at the invasion within its mind. The creature’s primitive self awareness realized something had entered its consciousness, though it lacked the cognitive ability to even remotely conceive of how such a thing was possible. The invasion instinctively angered it though, to the point of once again straining against the wires that held its limbs, causing those wires to dig deeply into its flesh.

The pain of the wires caused the Great Consulate to cry out in pleasure. This

was the experience he so craved - lovely, delicious, life giving and life taking pain.

He watched in wonder and anticipation as his own body reached out to take a long bamboo rod from the wall of the killing room. The interior of the bamboo was filled entirely with solid tungsten, among the heaviest and strongest metals. The lower half of the rod was blackened with the blood and skin fragments of the Great Consulate's previous guests. There had been that old man who had nearly killed him, other men, women, children, and now his own seekers. All of them in the end had fallen under the weight of this bamboo rod, so similar in

appearance to the rod the Great Consulate had felt against his own back as a child growing up in Indonesia so many lifetimes ago before he was made a man, before he knew himself to be God.

The seeker pulled itself back tightly into a corner of the room, sensing danger from the approaching figure. The Great Consulate felt the walls cold, smooth surface just as the seeker felt it. So too did he feel the seeker's fear. He watched himself approach the seeker and look down upon it, the bamboo stick held within his left hand, raising it up slowly above the creature's head.

The first blow crashed into the seeker's right cheek, tearing the dark leathery flesh open enough to reveal the bone beneath. The pain was enough to cause the creature to lose vision momentarily as it vomited up a handful sized amount of black bile that fell across the front of its chest and onto the floor.

The Great Consulate watched and then felt as he delivered another blow to the back of the Seeker's head, and yet another that slammed into the thing's right shoulder. He could feel the breaking of the seeker's bone just as he could also sense the excited, diseased smell of his own breath as he struggled to bring the bamboo stick down upon the

thing yet again before what little strength he had began to quickly dissipate from the effort.

“Don’t stop! Hurt it! Love it! Feel it! Life and death over all things! That is your destiny! Keep going! Do it! Do it! Do it!”

The voice always lost its composure during the time spent in the killing room. With every painful wound, every surge of instinctive self preservation from the victims, the voice’s excitement grew.

After a couple more fatigue-weakened strikes from the bamboo stick, the Great Consulate leaned against the wall

farthest from the seeker, his heart slamming inside his sunken, abscess riddled chest. As the breath painfully wheezed in and out of his single lung, there was a moment of sincere panic that he might be suffering a heart attack. Was such a thing possible?

A minute passed and the pain in his chest began to finally subside enough that he could stand up and look down upon his work. No more communication came from the sensory device because the seeker was now unconscious. The Great Consulate removed the glasses and returned them and the bamboo stick to their places on the wall of his killing room.

Though still struggling for breath, he could not help but shuffle closer to the seeker and look lovingly at the results of the intimate experience they had just shared. It was not dead, and would likely recover well enough that they would be able to enjoy another such experience in another day or two. Seekers were designed to withstand an extraordinary amount of punishment, and were capable of recovering quickly. And this seeker in particular seemed especially strong.

The creature's face was a mass of blood. A cheekbone jutted out from ripped flesh. One shoulder sat noticeably

lower than the other. The back of its head still bled profusely. A hand hung loosely from a wrist that had been broken when the thing attempted to block one of the blows.

It was beautiful.

The Great Consulate leaned down and extended a shaking left hand to caress the horrifically damaged cheek of the unconscious seeker. That hand then returned to his mouth, where his darkened, tobacco burned tongue hungrily licked the murky black blood of the creature he considered his child.

“Don’t forget that group from Alaska.

They intend to destroy all that you have built. They think they have found something, or someone. Don't underestimate them. You must kill them. They would believe themselves capable of destroying you. A god! Send more seekers to them. Let your children rip their flesh from those Dominatus pigs. You can watch them as they do it. You can feel that flesh. Taste that flesh. Devour it with them."

The Great Consulate closed his eyes and imagined how amazing such a thing would be. To be there inside of his children as they caught those fucking animals from Dominatus. Those pathetic creatures who had managed to destroy

so many of his beloved drones. Yes, his seekers were coming for them. There was but a few watching them now, but more were coming. More than enough...

XIV.

Mac was drowning. His lungs were collapsing in upon themselves - unable to replenish with oxygen. Far above him was a glimmer of light – the surface. Below him was darkness. He struggled to rise to the surface, but his arms and legs were unable to move within the water - water that felt too thick and

unyielding. His heart threatened to pound itself free from his chest, working much too hard to move his muscles in the absence of necessary air.

He was dying, and he wasn't alone.

Someone, or something, was in the blackness with him. Below his still struggling feet, Mac could sense the presence. Darker even than the murky depths, whatever it was it wanted Mac badly.

The former Navy SEAL and government gun for hire, over years of assignments to the very worst holes of humanity across the globe, did not believe in

God. He had seen too much pain and suffering in this life to entertain any thought that some loving, all knowing being existed somewhere. And if there was a god, he had certainly long ago stopped giving a shit about humankind. Mac couldn't blame God for that. Humankind was an assorted collection of nasty fucks and always had been.

No, we were on our own, and once our time was up, that was it - lights out.

Not that Mackenzie Walker didn't still care about people, he did. He cared about the few good people who were left. He had worked to protect some of them during his time in Dominatus. He

still hoped that somehow, maybe, there remained enough good and caring people that some scrap of what was once America could be saved, and built upon, so that future generations could know and live in a United States that did, at one time, actually exist.

His love of America had always been Mac's driving force. It is what had allowed him to do those things that his government had instructed him must be done. Lives had to be taken, so that many more lives could be saved. Knowing now though, that the system that had ordered him to do so was even then, terribly corrupted, did not diminish the sense of doing right that Mac carried

with him during those years of military and contract service. Nor did it diminish in him the love of the United States, at least, the potential that was the United States, Mac had always instinctively been drawn to. Mac Walker had always believed in the founding principles of America. As clichéd or silly some might view those principles, he truly believed that the United States was built upon the most basic and fundamental human desire for freedom and liberty, and he had based the entirety of his adult life in protecting those principles, even at the cost of his own humanity.

His heart was slowing, giving up the

fight.

Mac was so tired. He was old. He was sick. The surface was too far, the water too cold and too deep, and much too dark. Life was leaving him. What was it General Douglas MacArthur had said to Congress upon his retirement? That old soldiers never die, they just fade away. Mac Walker was now just... fading away.

The darkness beneath him was closer, that unknown thing. Mac could sense it reaching for him, wanting to wrap itself around his feet and drag him down.

The thought panicked him enough to

force Mac to again fight for his life, to push upward toward the light just beyond the water's surface. Mac's lungs were fire inside of his chest, screaming at him to breathe anything - to simply open his mouth and allow the water to fill him. The mind still overruled the lungs though, and Mac's mouth remained shut tightly as his arms and legs struggled to continue pushing slowly upward. The surface was closer now, the light growing stronger, the blackness falling away below his feet.

Mac was not yet ready to die – he was going to make it.

And then he felt the unmistakable tug of

being pulled down. The surface quickly grew more distant. The light above was swallowed by the darkness below. And still, he went down until darkness folded in upon yet more darkness. Whatever thing had wrapped itself around Mac's feet was never going to release him. Its strength and determination were too great. Mac knew his life was no more. Past, present, and future held no meaning to him here in this place. Never-ending darkness was all that was left.

Mac awoke with his chest heaving, struggling for breath. He quickly covered his mouth to muffle the sound of his own panic so as to not wake the others who slept around him inside the

small cabin. A thick layer of sweat covered him, his clothes damp and clinging to his body.

His lungs cried out for oxygen, but even as he opened his mouth wider to accommodate the demand, he was unable to inhale deep enough to do so, and what little oxygen that did enter his lungs caused him to begin coughing uncontrollably. Mac looked down into the palm of his right hand and saw blood.

“Shit.”

Brando had awoken and was looking at Mac, his head cocked slightly to the left.

Mac recalled reading many years ago how a group of doctors were using dogs to discover cancerous cells in human patients. The greatly enhanced sense of smell dogs had allowed them to sense sickness in other dogs, and, so the doctors said, in people as well. As Brando's eyes looked into his own, Mac couldn't help but believe that on some level, the Doberman was aware of the cancer that was quickly overtaking his body.

“Well Brando, how about we keep that between ourselves for now, ok?”

Mac laid back and concentrated on his breathing, forcing his lungs to expand

and contract slowly and take in as much oxygen as possible as he slowly inhaled through his nose and exhaled out his mouth. The pain from his lungs lessened considerably and his heart slowed to a much more relaxed rhythm.

Satisfied that he wasn't dying tonight, Mac allowed himself to drift off into much needed sleep.

In a corner of the cabin that allowed him to see outside to where the horses were gathered, Cooper Wyse glanced over at Mac's form and was glad to see the older man doing better. Clearly something was wrong with Mac's health, which Brando had sensed almost

immediately, but Cooper had long followed the belief that if a man didn't want to tell you something, it wasn't any of your business to try and make them. Sometimes a person's secrets were all they had left in this life. The rancher lowered his hat over his eyes, said a silent prayer for the former Navy SEAL, and let sleep overtake him as well.

XV.

Just before the sun peeked through the tops of the trees from the east, Cooper Wyse was already up and checking on his four remaining horses. Brando was

running across the clearing, stopping often to sniff the ground or lift his leg to mark yet another tree. All of the assorted bags that had been packed atop the horses were removed. Cooper knew they would not be going any further on this trip.

Dublin joined Cooper outside, her eyes scanning the tree line where the sun's light was steadily growing stronger.

“We aren’t taking the horses?”

Cooper shook his head as he looked through each bag and then checked the straps to make sure the contents were secured.

“Imran travels here using an old military transport vehicle. Keeps it parked just on the other side of the trees over there. We’ll all be able to fit inside it, so no sense trying to bring the horses along with us. And they know the way back to the ranch. They’ll be safer there than with us, especially where we’re going.”

Cooper had returned to looking over his horses, and Dublin noted how careful and gentle he was with the large animals. She sensed too how saddened he still was with the horse that had been killed by the drone yesterday.

Brando ran over to greet Dublin, his

head nudging against her leg, his eyes clear and alert, clearly enjoying his morning activity.

Reese came outside as well, putting his arm around Dublin and the leaning down to greet the Doberman.

“Hello Brando!”

Brando’s cropped tail wagged excitedly as he did the same grinning smile he had given Mac yesterday. Dublin laughed aloud and then leaned down to smile back at the dog.

“This is one great dog you have here Mr. Wyse.”

Cooper looked over at Brando and smiled.

“You keep calling me Mr. Wyse and making me feel like an old man Dublin. Just call me Coop. And yes, Brando is something special.”

Hearing Coop say his name, Brando jumped over to the rancher and sat with his left shoulder leaning against Cooper's thigh. While still looking over a horse with one hand, Cooper's other hand reached down to gently pat Brando's head.

Bear was the next to come outside. He

leaned forward and then backwards, his hands placed against his lower back.

“Got to stretch out every day or I could end up stuck in one position. Bad back - too much football as a kid.”

Reese recalled Bear mentioning his back during their interview in Dominatus two years ago.

Hoping to improve his relationship with Brando, Bear leaned down and motioned for the Doberman to come see him. Brando stared back at the big man for a moment looking disinterested, then relented and walked slowly over to Bear where he then stood staring at the man

face to face.

Bear gave the dog a big smile which Brando did not return.

Cooper looked over at the two and shook his head.

“Good god Bear, you look damn crazy grinning at him like that. No wonder Brando don’t trust you.”

Bear scowled at Cooper’s remark as he stood back up to his full height of more than six and a half feet.

‘Sooner or later, me and that dog are gonna be the best of friends.’”

Imran was next to emerge from the cabin. He carried small paper cups of juice on a tray which he offered to the others.

Dublin took one of the cups and drank from it, then lowered the cup and looked at it more closely.

“This is a Dixie Cup! I haven’t seen one of these since I was a teenager!”

Imran smiled broadly, pleased his gift was received so well by another person.

“Yes! We had a shipment of those come from a collector back East, Montreal...

that was nearly a year ago. Once things began to be banned, people began to save them up. Garages and warehouses full of stuff like that. Now it is all part of the Black Market here. I traded thousands of those cups to someone in Oregon for a car that I then sold to the godfather himself in Wilfred. He loves old cars. Well, you'll see all about that. Wilfred is a most amazing place.”

Cooper stood next to Imran and took one of the cups of juice.

“Yeah, hadn't told you much about Wilfrid, the cars, the streets. They even had a milkman doing morning deliveries like it was Mayberry or something. It's

pretty damn surreal what he's got going on out there. More than a few people call it insanity, but frankly, I think it's all kind of nice. A reminder of the way things used to be. Suppose that's why the godfather went to all the trouble in creating it. Let him live out his days in a world that no longer exists. In that way, not much different than what you had going in Dominatus."

"What about Dominatus?"

Mac's voice bellowed from just inside the cabin's doorway. Despite its volume, he sounded tired. He walked outside to join the others, also taking a cup of juice from Imran's tray.

Bear tipped his head in Cooper's direction.

“Cooper was saying how this outpost, or town or whatever it is that we are heading to, is like Dominatus. Kind of like a place that represents what the world used to be.”

Mac didn't appear impressed.

“Like Dominatus, huh? Yeah, we'll see about that.”

Mac looked down at the packs, pointing to one that had been on his horse yesterday.

“Need to get one of those shortwave portables out of there Coop. Want to check in with Juneau, see if they have anything new from the Texas Resistance.”

Cooper Wyse simply nodded and reached into the pack and withdrew one of the handhelds and tossed it to Mac.

“Input the frequency and talk away. Should get a clear signal from here back to Juneau no problem.”

Mac took the device and walked back inside the cabin. Bear watched Mac as he disappeared inside the cabin and then

whispered to Reese.

“Mac look ok to you? He seems...more tired.”

Reese glanced in the direction of the cabin's interior to make sure Mac wasn't close enough to hear them.

“Might be the trip over here - the drone attack. It's easy to forget how old he is. I've had to remind myself more than a few times that he's a seventy five year old man. As tough as he is, he's not invincible.”

Bear stood silently for a moment before looking down at Reese.

“Maybe. Still...seems more off than that. Something besides his age.”

Dublin was running across the clearing with Brando. The Doberman appeared delighted to have someone to burn off some morning energy with. Imran began to pick up two of the packs and strap them onto his back, straining just a bit under the weight.

“My vehicle is not so far. A short walk and then we will be off to Wilfrid.”

Imran's mood seemed perpetually positive and he appeared as happy as Brando to have new company in which

to share the day with.

Bear grabbed four of the packs and placed two over each of his shoulders, giving no indication the additional two hundred pounds was even the slightest bother to him. He also carried the portable, laser guided anti drone gun in his right hand.

Dublin made her way back to the group and picked up one of the last three remaining packs. Reese began to strap on two of the final three packs when a voice called out from behind him.

“Now what the hell are you all doing? Trying to keep me from carrying my fair

share, is that it?”

Reese thought Mac was joking, but the look on Mac’s face said otherwise. He was upset.

“Bear’s carrying four, you and Imran got two each....guess that leaves me and Dublin to carry just one pack, huh? You putting me in with the women, now? No offense to you Dublin, but I ain’t used to being coddled, and I don’t like it one bit.”

As Mac grumbled his dissatisfaction, Cooper Wyse leaned over and slowly placed the final pack onto his back, leaving none for Mac to have to carry.

“Now Mac, way I figured it was you would walk ahead of us with your weapon ready to go. You might be the quickest and most accurate shooter here, right? So why not free you up to use those skills if they’re needed.”

Mac shot Cooper a look of disdain, sensing the rancher was coming dangerously close to patronizing him. Bear quickly followed up Cooper’s suggestion with words of support.

“I like that idea Coop, like it a lot. And I can vouch for Mac’s ability with a gun. Nobody here better than him. What do you think Reese?”

Reese took Bear's lead.

“Makes sense Mac, don't you think? Let us handle the supplies and you focus on keeping us safe, like you've always done.”

Dublin interjected as well, though her attempt proved even more adept. She simply changed the subject.

“Did you get a hold of Juneau, Mac?”

Mac looked at Dublin, then back to the other four, and then back to Dublin.

“Yeah, spoke with Franklin personally.

They're not in Juneau though - heading back to Anchorage. Franklin said Anchorage had three drone flyovers late yesterday. A fisherman went missing off of St. Paul. They think a drone might have sunk his boat for target practice. Had another twenty reports of drone sightings from all over the state. Things are tightening up back there real quick. I told him about our own drone attack of course. How the timing didn't seem right. How it knew where we would be."

Bear, born and raised in Texas, asked if Franklin had heard from the Texas Resistance. Mac nodded.

‘Yeah, Franklin got off the short wave with them just a few minutes before talking with me. The New United Nations has about a thousand tanks pushing into Texas now and at least that many drones flying out ahead of those tanks and bombing the hell out of anything that moves. Few thousand of the Resistance are holed up around Midland, while the rest of them are moving out toward El Paso and into Mexico if they have to.’”

Cooper’s eyes narrowed at the mention of Mexico.

“Mexico? That shit hole? That place is worse than Canada. Run by the cartels.

Just like up here, but instead of Muslim fanatics, it's the drug lords. They'll cut off your head just the same though. Why would they be going into Mexico?"

Mac let out a sigh, his shoulders noticeably slumping.

"To hide I suppose. They are dealing with the New United Nations pushing them back. Either they fall into the water, or they get pushed back into Mexico. They don't have much choice. Don't have the weapons to fight back. Not yet. That's where we come in. We make our way to this Manitoba priest. We get that weapon and we give the Texas Resistance a chance. We give

them a chance and every other group that is rising up and fighting back.”

Cooper Wyse finished strapping his pack on and then looked out across the clearing.

“Well then, I guess we better get going.”

Cooper slapped the backside of Licorice as he yelled out the word home. The horse immediately set off across the clearing and into the woods beyond as the other three horses followed close behind.

Dublin appeared nearly as saddened by the horses’ departure as the rancher was.

“Guess there’s no turning back now, huh?”

Mac and Imran took the lead in front of the group as the other three followed closely behind them. Even without a pack, Mac soon struggled to keep his labored breathing quiet and hidden from the others as his mind kept repeating the same words in his head.

*Not dying today. Not dying tomorrow.
Finish the mission...*

It was the very same refrain Mackenzie Walker had told himself nearly thirty five years ago when, bleeding from a

gunshot wound just below his right shoulder, he struggled to cross eight miles of arid, rocky terrain to reach a CIA safe house on the outskirts of Borama, a Somali city just inside the Ethiopian border.

Mac had reached that safe house just after nightfall, and within an hour, was being flown from the CIA safe house to a military medical facility aboard an American naval vessel in the Indian Ocean. He lost nearly a third of his blood before the medical team successfully closed the wound. Within three days he was out of bed and awaiting orders to return to Somalia to finish his mission. When those orders

did not come, Mac Walker made his way back to Somalia on his own and completed what had been left unfinished – a single bullet into the back of the head of a particularly aggressive Somali warlord who had been funding a growing pirate operation that was crippling the shipping lanes into and out of the Gulf of Aden and the Red Sea.

*Not dying today. Not dying tomorrow.
Finish the mission...*

Mac had survived a shot to the chest and finished that mission in Somalia all those years ago. He was intent on surviving this damn cancer long enough to finish this current mission against the

New United Nations. It was what he did. It was who he was, who he is, and who he would always be.

He wasn't dying today, but given the pain again searing his lungs with each breath taken as he struggled to keep up with Imran, Mac Walker quietly admitted to himself he was no longer so certain about tomorrow.

XVI.

It took nearly thirty minutes for the group to make their way to Imran's vehicle parked in another small clearing. Bear

looked at the machine and laughed.

“This thing actually runs Imran? Good god man, what a damn rust bucket!”

Imran dropped his backpack and turned to face Bear, his normally friendly face now scowling at the much larger man.

“This rust bucket has been my friend for a long time. She always starts. Always runs. Always gets me to where I need to go. Always. Show some respect.”

Unlike Bear, Mac appeared impressed by Imran’s “friend”.

“This is a CMP isn’t it? Canadian

Military Pattern Truck. Guessing it's World War Two era. Four wheel drive, extra heavy suspension. This thing can get someone there and back for sure. How'd you come by this Imran?"

Grateful for Mac's approval, Imran smiled broadly as he gently ran his hand along one of the heavily rusted metallic fenders.

"That's right! A CMP truck! I won it from the godfather himself! Card game! He loves to gamble. All night he plays cards. Smokes and drinks and plays cards. This time I won - years ago. I have been using her ever since. Carrying goods back and forth. Here,

there, and everywhere. She always makes it. She always gets me back to Wilfrid.”

Mac paused along the right door and noted three distinct holes near the bottom.

“You been shot at?”

Imran again smiled while nodding.

“Muslim gang on Highway 37 after picking up goods from the city of Prince Rupert. Drove right through them but they got off some shots. Followed me for almost twenty miles before giving up. They always give up. At least so

far.”

Dublin walked over to look at the bullet holes and then turned to Imran.

“You travelled all the way down to Prince Rupert?”

Imran’s pride in the success of his Black Market business was unmistakable as he answered Dublin.

“I travel everywhere...wherever a good deal can be found. Wherever the reward outweighs the risk. I’ve been as far south as Vancouver a couple of times. As far east as Edmonton in the Alberta province, and as far north as Whitehorse

in the Yukon Territory province, and also to the cabin we just came from of course.”

Bear still appeared amazed Imran could travel so far and so regularly in what he had just recently described as a rust bucket.

“You did all that travelling in this thing? Really?”

Imran’s scowl returned as he dealt with Bear’s criticism of his beloved transport vehicle.

“Yes, every time. You’ll see. She runs and runs and runs. Every time.”

Reese was already loading up the packs into the back of the CMP. It's open truck bed was nearly seven feet long and at least five feet wide – plenty of room for all of the packs and to seat the rest of them comfortably in the back. Cooper placed his own pack into the back as well and then whistled at Brando to jump in. The Doberman gracefully leapt into the truck bed and then looked at the group as if to see if anyone had noticed how well he had followed Cooper's request.

Cooper in turn pointed out the extra large tread on the truck's tires to the others in the group.

“These things are what will get us across the glacier fields a few miles from here.”

Imran slapped the side of one of the large tires.

“No problems! Easy going!”

Cooper Wyse grinned back at Imran’s enthusiastic devotion to his truck.

“Easy going sounds just fine by me Imran.”

Seeing that all of the packs had been placed in the back, Imran opened the

driver's door and stepped into the cabin. He turned the key which resulted in the engine turning over once...and then going silent. Bear rolled his eyes.

“Knew it. This piece of shit ain't getting us anywhere.”

Imran yelled out the window of the truck.

“Big man needs to be quiet! You've offended Princess!”

Bear glanced over to Cooper and whispered out of the side of his mouth.

“Princess?”

Cooper nodded.

“That’s her name.”

“The truck?”

Again Cooper nodded.

“Yeah – the truck. Her name is Princess.”

Imran’s repeated his demand to Bear that he apologize to Princess.

“Big man! I told you to apologize! You need to tell her you’re sorry!”

Mac stepped over to Bear and pointed to the truck.

“Just apologize to the damn truck Bear so we can get going.”

Bear looked down at Mac and shook his head.

“You think if I apologize this pile of rust will actually start up?”

Brando barked at Bear, causing Reese to laugh.

“Even Brando thinks you need to apologize Bear!”

“I could give a shit what that dog thinks. He’s still on my list.”

Brando barked again.

Imran stepped out of the truck and stood directly under Bear. The man from Turkey pointed a finger into the face of the former NFL lineman while nodding toward Princess.

“You apologize to her Bear. Apologize and then we can go. You offended her.”

Brando let out a low, menacing growl, his upper lip pulling back to expose his teeth. He wasn’t smiling though – the Doberman meant business. Then the dog

jumped from the back of the truck, leaping over Bear's right shoulder, causing him to stumble backwards and nearly fall over.

Brando hit the ground and took off toward the tree line some fifty yards from where the group was standing around Imran's truck. The Doberman stopped just short of the trees and stood still, continuing to growl at whatever was hiding within the darkness of the forest.

Cooper put two fingers to his mouth and let out a piercing whistle.

“Brando! Come!”

The dog ignored Cooper's command, remaining in his position between the trees and the group.

Cooper whistled again and issued the same command for Brando to return. This time the Doberman complied, turning and quickly running to Cooper's right side where he sat next to the rancher, though the dog still issued a low growl as his eyes remained looking into the forest.

Cooper slowly drew one of his two six shooters that hung from each of his hips and whispered to the others.

“Something out there is watching us, has to be the same thing that had Brando so upset yesterday. That means we’re being followed.”

Everyone else followed Cooper’s example and drew their own weapons as well.

A loud shriek issued from the trees, sounding equal parts human and beast.

Mac lowered himself onto his right knee, aiming his weapon into the trees.

Another loud shriek came from the tree line, though this time it was answered by a similar sound some hundred yards to

the right. This second shriek was answered by a third that sounded no more than a few more hundred yards back from the first two. And then a fourth shriek came from yet another location, followed by several more.

Cooper turned to Imran.

“Might want to get your truck started Imran. Sounds like we have some real bad company making its way toward us.”

Imran’s eyes were wide as he looking toward the tree line.

“Yes, I think you’re right.”

Imran once again attempted to start Princess, but like the first time, the vehicle turned over once and then went silent. The things in the forest continued to shriek. Whatever they were, they sounded excited – and hungry.

Bear reached into the back of the truck bed and removed one of two Mossberg shotguns he had brought with him and then began to slowly walk toward the trees with the shotgun pointed in front of him.

“I ain’t waiting for that pile of shit to start. Whatever wants to come out of those woods I’m killing.”

Imran jumped out of the truck and opened its hood, a small hammer held in his right hand.

“Apologize to Princess big man! If you want to go now, you need to apologize!”

Bear looked back at the others while the sounds of the creatures’ shrieks continued to multiply inside the forest.

Reese implored for the big man to do as Imran requested.

“Can’t hurt anything Bear. C’mon, apologize to his truck and be done with it.”

Bear took another look toward the tree line and then walked angrily back to where Imran was leaning over into the engine compartment.

“Fine – sorry about what I said. About your truck.”

Imran turned his head to look back at Bear.

“That’s fine, but you have to apologize to her, not me.”

Bear looked like he was about to pick Imran up and throw him into orbit.

“Oh, for god’s sake, you got to be kidding me!”

Imran again turned his head to see Bear.

“No, I’m not kidding big man. You apologize to Princess. Then she’ll start for us.”

Bear’s face grew red with rage as his hands gripped the shotgun tightly. The shrieking grew even louder and now they could hear the unmistakable sound of movement from the forest.

“There’s at least ten of those things out there, maybe more. Whatever they are, they’re getting ready attack. It’s a pack

of something, and they're hunting... hunting us."

"I'm sorry about what I said. To the truck. Sorry. Sorry...Princess."

Bear's apology, though said through tightly clenched teeth, appeared to satisfy Imran, who was tapping something lightly with his hammer. The small man leaned back from the engine compartment, closed the hood, and began to make his way back to the driver's seat with a satisfied smile on his dark, rounded face.

"Ok – let's go."

Cooper, Bear and Reese jumped into the back of the former Canadian military vehicle, while Mac and Dublin joined Imran inside the truck's enclosed cabin. Brando began to bark aggressively, causing Cooper to hold onto the dog to prevent him from jumping from the truck bed.

Imran closed his eyes tightly and then turned the key. The small diesel engine hesitated briefly, turned over once, hesitated again, and then fired up as thick black smoke belched from its exhaust.

Mac looked through the vehicle's windshield toward the forest just before

his eyes caught a metallic glimmer of something in the distant sky above them.

“Oh no...”

XVII.

Both Dublin and Imran followed Mac’s gaze into the sky above the trees. The drone was approaching from the south. Even from this distance they could tell it was one of the larger armed drones, not a smaller surveillance drone. They had no more than a minute, possibly less, before the drone would be in range to strike at them.

Mac opened the truck's passenger door and hopped outside, making his way to the back of the vehicle. The creatures from the woods continued to shriek excitedly at one another.

Mac uttered one brief comment to Cooper Wyse while pointing into the sky with his right hand.

“Drone gun.”

Without even bothering to confirm the presence of the drone, Cooper shifted his position in the truck bed to locate the laser guided anti drone rifle. Once he found it, he yelled out for Imran to join

them outside the truck.

Smoothly hopping from the back of the truck with the drone rifle in his left hand, Cooper Wyse handed the gun to Imran and pointed into the sky where the drone was now less than a mile from their position.

“He know how to use that?”

Cooper nodded in response to Mac’s question.

“He’s the one who gave it to me. He’s the one who showed me how it works. Yeah, of any of us here, Imran’s the one who we want using it.”

Imran moved a small toggle switch toward him and then unlocked what appeared to be some kind of safety device. The small metallic box connected to the bottom of the rifle began to emit a low, steady humming noise.

“Gonna need a few seconds to power up.”

Nobody said anything. Even Brando had grown silent.

Imran raised the rifle's scope to his right eye and peered through it while aiming at the approaching drone. Mac noted the

small man's hands were shaking slightly.

“Take a deep breath and just focus Imran. You're doing fine.”

Imran smiled slightly as he the shaking diminished.

“Sight system is tabulating speed of approach. Locked in. Almost ready...”

Imran fired the anti-drone rifle. The low humming noise suddenly changed pitch, becoming both considerably louder and a much higher, piercing tone. The rifle didn't move back against Imran though as a conventional weapon would have

done. There was no repercussive force. No sound of firing ammunition - just a single pinkish-blue line of light that instantly rose upward toward the quickly approaching drone.

Then...nothing.

Imran continued to stare through the site.

“System indicates target hit.”

The drone, near enough to be more clearly seen, appeared unharmed. It was descending toward them no more than a thousand yards away.

“Hope that thing is telling you the right

information Imran.”

Mac’s voice betrayed the strain of the approaching drone, though he remained unmoving.

Imran opened his mouth to respond, but before the words could be formed the sky lit up with a massive explosion. Seconds later, the sound of that explosion travelled over them and into the trees where the shrieking creatures then went silent.

As remnants of the drone slowly fell from the sky, Bear’s face broke out into what was for him, a very rare thing. He was smiling.

“That was awesome.”

Cooper Wyse winked at Imran as he clapped him on the shoulder.

“Thanks Imran. You done good.”

A single pained howl arose from within the trees where the creatures had gathered, followed by silence.

Peering toward the forest, Mac turned back toward the truck, which Imran had wisely left running.

“Ok, time to go - NOW.”

Brando began to bark again, his eyes focused on whatever things remained hidden just inside the woods. As the truck began to slowly drive down a gently sloping hillside, Reese positioned himself at the back of the truck bed with a rifle pointed at the tree line, ready to shoot anything that might follow them.

Nothing emerged from those trees though, and as minutes passed, and the forest grew smaller, everyone inside Imran's truck began to relax. Even Brando lay down with his head on his front paws and appeared to go to sleep.

Cooper looked at the resting Doberman and then leaned back, buttoned up his

jacket, and pulled his hat down toward his eyes.

“Brando’s got the right idea. Rest up when you get the chance.”

Bear slowly moved his hand to reach out and pet the Doberman. Brando raised his head from his paws and gave Bear a look that seemed to question what the big man’s intentions were. Bear scratched just under the dog’s chin as a kind of peace offering between the two, which Brando appeared to accept with great appreciation, lifting his head to allow Bear full access to the area.

Opening his eyes slightly, Cooper Wyse

voiced his approval.

“Well look at that, who says a dog and a bear can’t be the best of friends?”

Inside the truck’s cabin, Imran was talking excitedly to both Mac and Dublin about how amazing Camp Wilfrid was. While Dublin appeared nearly as energetic and engaged in the conversation as Imran, Mac leaned his face against the window of the vehicle and struggled to not drift away into yet more sleep. His breathing was not such a struggle today, thought the burning sensation in his lungs remained and now he felt a throbbing pain from his lower back. He tried to tell himself that

sleeping on the cabin floor had simply aggravated something, but he knew that this new pain was more likely related to the cancer.

After nearly two hours of driving, very few trees grew up from the rocky terrain, and the temperature outside had fallen to just below freezing. Areas of ice and snow were becoming more common.

“We will be at the glacial area soon. I must stop and prepare the tires for the crossing. You two can stay in here and rest...won't be long.”

Imran brought the vehicle to a stop and hopped outside while Mac and Dublin

sat inside the cabin with the heater turned on. Dublin was somewhat surprised Mac had not offered to help Imran with the tires as he was normally not one to allow others to work while he rested.

“You feeling ok Mac?”

Mac kept his eyes closed behind his glasses but managed to give Dublin a small smile.

“Yeah, just a little tired. Nice to rest for a bit.”

Dublin noted Mac had grown more gaunt in recent days. The lines around his

mouth were deeper, the cheekbones more pronounced. His short cropped hair had gone from salt and pepper gray to nearly all white since the last days of Dominatus. In the twenty two years Dublin Meyer had known Mackenzie Walker, she had never thought of him as old. He had always proven himself as tough as the task required, and Dublin recalled her grandfather remarking more than once that Mac was likely the most dangerous and capable human being he had ever known. She realized sitting so close to him in the cabin of Imran's truck though, that old age had finally arrived for Mac Walker, and Dublin feared the journey that lay ahead of them to reach the priest in Churchill, Manitoba would

prove too much for him.

Dublin reached down and took Mac's left hand into her right hand and gave it a gentle squeeze.

“Mac?”

“Yeah – what?”

“I just want you to know...to know how much I appreciate what you've done for me and so many other people. All of those years you helped keep us safe in Dominatus, and the friendship with my grandfather. How you saved so many of us when the drones came. Just...just want you to know that I think you're an

amazing man, Mac.”

Mac was silent as Dublin paused.

“And...and I want you to know how much you are loved. By me, by Reese, by everyone who knows you. We all love you Mac.”

Mac remained silent, his eyes looking out the window as Imran went around the truck releasing some of the air from each tire. Finally he turned to look at Dublin and squeezed her hand that was still holding his own.

Dublin was surprised to see tears moistening the corners of Mac's eyes as

he struggled to tell her something. She couldn't recall ever seeing him cry before.

Mac looked back toward the window, whispering a response as he did so.

“Thank you Dublin. Thank you.”

XVIII.

After releasing some of the air out of each of the tires, Imran happily hopped back into the transport vehicle and continued driving slowly across the large valley they had been travelling

through for the last hour. In the process, he explained his purpose for removing air from his tires.

“You see, the less air, the more of the rubber can grip the ice. So when I approach the glacial area, I lower the pressure. Once I am past the glacial area, I use a portable compressor and re-inflate the tires to allow us to travel faster and get better mileage. Simple!”

Dublin was the only one who heard Imran’s response as Mac was sleeping deeply. She glanced out the back window of the truck and saw Reese, Bear and Cooper also sleeping in the truck bed. She smiled to herself as she

saw Bear's arm draped over Brando.

Imran's conversation with Dublin continued as the miles slowly passed beneath the wheels of the truck.

“I've been back and forth across this glacial field, oh goodness, at least thirty times! At least! One time I did it during a terrible storm. Ice storm! Froze my windshield wipers. Couldn't see! Even with the heater on, I was cold! That trip took forever! Hour after hour driving in that storm. And then – it was gone! The sun came out like the storm had never been there! And I made my delivery. I always make my delivery!”

Dublin couldn't help but be amused by Imran's enthusiasm for his business.

“Do you have family Imran? In Wilfrid?”

Imran hesitated for a moment before answering.

“No...no family. I have friends though. Many friends. Business associates. It is a good life, considering.”

“Considering what?”

Again Imran paused before replying to Dublin.

“Considering that...that we all must live in a world that makes so little sense. A world that killed my parents, that separated me from my brothers and sisters. A world that tried to destroy your former home in Dominatus. Considering all of that, I consider what life I do have is blessed. To get to know others like yourself and Mac, and Reese and Bear and Cooper, I am blessed.”

Even though his name had been spoken, Mac remained sleeping, his breathing somewhat uneven.

“Well, you certainly have a positive attitude about things Imran.”

As Dublin gave her compliment to Imran, the truck was jolted hard by a large rock that the right front tire drove over. This jolt was followed by yet another and another. The ground was growing increasingly uneven, and even the large transport truck was having difficulty crossing over it.

Mac awoke when his head banged up against the side window as yet another hard bump passed through the truck's cabin. He winced as a shot of pain gripped his lower back.

“We gonna be getting a lot of this shit Imran?”

Imran was looking intently in front of him, trying to navigate around the worst of the terrain.

“I apologize Mac. We are about thirty minutes from the glacier. It will get worse... before it gets worse.”

Mac scowled as another hard jolt was felt in his lower spine.

“Don’t you mean it’ll get worse before it gets better?”

Imran shook his head.

“No...worse and then worse.”

Mac let out a long slow sigh.

“Great.”

As bad as it was for Mac, for those sitting in the back of the truck it was considerably more difficult. The temperature continued to drop to well below freezing, and a chill north wind made the air around them feel even colder. Cooper Wyse took out a large horse blanket from one of the packs and covered all of them under it, including Brando who for the first time during the journey was indicating he was uncomfortable. Every few seconds the dog would tremble with a shivering shake of his body.

Bear growled his own dissatisfaction as he pulled the horse blanket over his chest.

“Well ain’t this about the shittiest vacation we’ve ever had?”

Cooper chuckled.

“Give it another half an hour. It’ll be a whole lot worse. I’ve only made a few of these trips. Hated it every time. Imran though – he loves it. Crazy little bastard.”

Reese, feeling just a little warmer under the blanket, wanted to know more about

Fort Wilfrid, and the man called the godfather.

“Coop, this place called Wilfrid, when was the last time you were there?”

Cooper didn't open his eyes as he responded to Reese.

“Been a couple years.”

“Do you like it there?”

Though he couldn't tell, Reese sensed Cooper shrugging under the blanket.

“It's interesting. Too many people though. Don't like any place that has too

many people shoved into one place. Makes me itchy to move on. I like the cars though, the ice cream shop, the school and all that. Pretty cool what he's done out there. Or crazy. Probably plenty of both."

"You mean the godfather?"

Cooper gave a single nod. He wanted to go back to sleep but was too polite to tell Reese to stop asking him questions.

"Yeah."

"So you've met him?"

Cooper's voice was getting softer as

sleep was overtaking him.

“Uh-huh.”

“Why do they call this guy the godfather?”

Cooper opened his eyes this time and looked over at Reese.

“You’ll see. He just...it’s a name he was given by everybody else and it stuck I guess.”

Reese was about to ask yet another question when his face wrinkled up in disgust. Cooper appeared to have gotten a whiff of the same thing Reese did as he

too frowned and shook his head.

“That must have been Brando. He can get pretty gassy at times.”

Hearing his name, Brando stuck his head up and looked at Cooper. The Doberman appeared offended to have been wrongfully accused of a crime he didn't commit.

Both Reese and Cooper noticed Bear's shoulders moving under the blanket. He was trying to stifle his own laughter.

‘Sorry guys - can't let Brando take the blame for that one. That was all me.’

Reese turned his head to take a gulp of uncontaminated air.

“Good God Bear!”

Satisfied he was rightfully found innocent of Bear’s recent gastrointestinal crime, Brando lowered his head again and went back to sleep.

Before he joined Brando in his nap, Cooper Wyse glanced upward and made a mental note of the darkening sky. The day was passing too quickly and they were travelling too slowly. They still had another six or seven hours to go before reaching the safety of Wilfrid.

It would be dark sooner than that...

XIX.

Dublin was amazed at the sight of the glacial fields. For as far as she could see, there was bluish ice that cut in between darker colored, jagged rocks. Miles and miles of ice and rock. Imran drove the truck slowly down a steep ravine-like passage, before the vehicle finally settled onto the ice field itself.

Again stepping out of the truck, Imran reached behind his driver's seat and took out what appeared to be some kind

of folded, silver colored tarp. Unfolding the tarp, which was ten by ten in size, he handed it to Cooper.

“Safety blanket, same thing mountain climbers would use. As I pick up speed, it will get very cold back here. Stay under this and you’ll be fine.”

Bear looked at the thin material of the safety blanket and shook his head.

“This little thing is supposed to keep us warm? Bullshit.”

Reese grabbed the blanket and spread it out over Cooper, himself, Brando and Bear.

“This material keeps in all of our body heat Bear. Trust me, you’re going to be complaining it’s too hot underneath this thing.”

Imran offered up a wide smile, satisfied his passengers would remain comfortable sitting in the open truck bed as he crossed the ice fields.

Cooper was again looking up into the quickly darkening sky.

“Running out of time Imran. I recall it’s slow going across here. You got to be careful not to drive over a thin area of ice, right?”

Imran's smile somehow managed to grow even wider.

“Oh, you don't know all the work I've done out here do you Cooper? Hours and hours marking the way. I've created a road right through this area. I marked the safest route through the ice fields. The thickest areas of ice. I can go as fast as Princess can take us! Have some faith in me cowboy! Faith!”

Cooper's eyebrows raised momentarily before giving yet another shrug of his shoulders.

“Ok then. I'm going back to sleep.

Wake me when get there.”

Imran chuckled and waived to the three men and one dog in the back of his truck.

“You’ll see. We’re going very fast now. Very fast!”

Imran returned to his place behind the wheel and pointed through the windshield at a row of orange flags, spaced about twenty yards apart. The row continued across the ice fields, disappearing on the other side.

“See that? That my friends, is Imran’s road! We simply stay close to those flags on either the left or the right, and

we are safe! Who is ready to go fast?”

Mac glanced over at Imran and then back out to the row of orange flags. Imran caught Mac’s look out of the corner of his eye and turned to the older man.

“How about you Mac? You ready to make good time?”

Imran tapped the top of his truck’s dashboard as he said the words “good time”.

Mac pointed his right finger toward the ice fields.

“Warp factor seven Mr. Sulu.”

Both Imran and Dublin looked back at Mac with clear confusion.

Mac sighed and again pointed to the vast ice fields in front of them.

“Just go dammit. All of you are too damn young to know about the good stuff.”

Imran's smile returned as he put the truck into gear. Soon their speed had increased to nearly fifty miles an hour as the crunching sound of ice and snow beneath the wheels filled the truck cabin. The landscape, at first beautiful, became more monotonous as every mile

travelled looked exactly the same as the previous miles – more and more blue tinted ice accompanied by the same outcroppings of darker colored rock.

An hour passed, and then two. Finally Imran slowed the vehicle down again as they began to descend into what appeared to a very narrow valley. Here there were no rocks but only ice, though the blue tint had been replaced by a clear, almost translucent color. Reaching the bottom of the decline, Imran peered intently in front of him, marking where his orange flags had been placed. Instead of just one row of flags though, there were now two rows, and it was between those rows that Imran

slowly drove the transport truck.

Mac opened his eyes again and leaned forward in the seat.

“Are we driving over a river?”

Imran nodded.

“Yes – large river. In this spot, it is almost always iced over.”

Mac continued to stare through the windshield.

“Almost?”

Imran waived his hand in Mac’s

direction, communicating that he thought Mac need not worry.

“We’ll be fine. I have been very careful where to mark the road across.”

Mac gave a thin smile as he looked back over at Imran.

“So if we have nothing to worry about, why are you driving so slowly now?”

Imran shook a finger at Mac in a way that communicated how silly he thought the question was.

“I learned a long time ago Mr. Mac Walker, to never go faster than your

angel can follow.”

Dublin nodded at Imran’s words, and leaned into Mac’s left shoulder.

“Hey Mac, that sounds like pretty good advice don’t you think?”

Mac let his eyes wander back to the truck’s side window, pausing before giving a low voiced response.

“Don’t believe in any angel watching over the likes of me.”

The truck suddenly lurched to the right, causing everyone to do the same. Bear’s voice called out from the back.

“What the hell was that?”

Imran had already opened his door and was making his way to the back of the truck. Nearly half of the right rear tire had fallen through and was hidden beneath the ice. Kneeling down to get a better look, Imran ran his hands along where the tire had fallen through, and then carefully looked over the entire area surrounding the transport truck. His face openly expressed his concern.

Cooper, Bear, and Reese were now standing next to Imran trying to figure out what he was looking at. After a few seconds, Cooper pointed to the ice just

inside the partially hidden right wheel.

“There – that whole spot is weakened. If we keep it in four wheel, and spin that back right wheel too much, it could cause more of the ice to break up... enough that the whole back of vehicle could start falling through. But if we don't keep it in four wheel drive, there's no power to the front wheels, and we stay stuck.”

Reese was looking more closely at the area of ice around the right wheel.

“So what's that mean? What's our options?”

Before Cooper could reply, Imran gave his own somewhat brief and to the point answer to Reese's question.

“Apologies for my language, but it means we're fucked. I stay in four wheel drive and spin that rear wheel, and then create more damage to the ice and we could go from bad to much worse. There is a river of very cold running water right underneath us here.”

Mac and Dublin joined the others. Mac knelt down on all fours to look over the ice surrounding the half-hidden wheel as the others stood silently watching him. After a minute or so of poking and prodding around the damaged ice, Mac

stood back up and nodded in Imran's direction.

“He's right. We're fucked.”

Bear stepped toward the back right corner of the vehicle and grabbed the rear bumper and pulled up on it a couple of times, then stood silently for a moment, before walking to the front of the truck and then back again to rejoin the others.

“What if I lift the back wheel here while the other wheels pull it out? The front bumper is big enough for at least a few of you to stand on. That will put more weight on the front tires and give them

more traction while the back corner here is being lifted so we don't damage the ice any more, and you just drive on ahead."

Imran looked at Bear and then the truck and shook his head.

"Too much weight. You can't lift it. No way. You're a big man, but you're not that big."

Mac's eyes narrowed as he stared at Bear, and a slow smile crept across his face.

"You think you can lift this back corner up enough to keep that tire from digging

too much into the broken ice?”

Bear took a deep breath and then pointed to the front of the truck.

“Get as many of you on that front bumper and that will help me to lift the back part. I can’t promise I can do it – but I’m sure willing to give a shot. It’s a hell of a lot better than us walking the rest of the way in the dark.”

Cooper Wyse glanced behind them toward the miles of ice fields they had already travelled that day.

“I’d agree with Bear on that – whatever those things were in the woods back

there...something tells me they ain't giving up on tracking us down. If we can get this thing moving again, we best do that as quickly as we possible."

Imran was still unconvinced of Bear's plan to free his transport truck from the broken ice.

"It won't work. It's a crazy idea. A waste of time. This truck is too heavy."

Bear grew impatient with Imran's disbelief.

"Maybe it will work, maybe it won't. Look, I spent hours as a kid mudding. Got more trucks into and out of trouble

than I can remember. Whatever end of the truck is stuck, you counter weight it to allow the other tires to dig you out. That's all we're doing here. Sure, this thing is bigger than anything I drove around in as a kid in Texas, but the principle is just the same, and we'll have a bunch of you standing on that front bumper. And not to brag little man, but I might be a whole lot stronger than you realize."

Imran was about to comment again, but Mac cut him off.

"Let's do it. Get as many of us on that front bumper as we can. Bear, you just let us know when you're ready. Imran,

you wait for Bear to tell you when, and take it slow. We want these tires spinning as little as possible.”

Imran was shaking his head as he returned to the driver's seat. Mac and the others walked to the front of the transport truck and looked at the front bumper. Made entirely of steel and nearly a foot wide, it provided more than enough room and stability for several people to safely stand on top of it. Mac was already lifting himself onto the bumper.

“We can get four of us shoulder to shoulder on this thing, Reese, Cooper, Dublin and me. I want Reese and Coop

on the outside. You're heavier than Dublin and me and we want the most weight around those front tires.”

The four of them positioned themselves on the top of the truck bumper as Mac had instructed. Reese was on the far left side, Cooper was on the far right, and Dublin and Mac stood in the middle. Mac called out to Bear.

“Ready up here Bear – your turn now!”

Bear stood glowering at the back right corner of the truck bed. Taking very slow, deep breaths, he found himself without thinking of it, reverting to an old weight training routine from his NFL

playing days that helped him to fully focus on moving as much weight as his body was capable of. His mind repeated a mantra he had not used in many years – one his father had taught him when Bear was an up and coming high school football star.

See it. Believe it. Achieve it.

Bear kept repeating the words in his head as he grasped the corner of the truck bed with both of his hands, bending his knees and digging his boots into the ice and snow to provide as wide and stable a base as possible.

See it. Believe it. Achieve it.

It was his father's voice that spoke the words to Bear at that moment, not his own. The man who had pushed his son to use the physical talents God had blessed him with so that he might achieve to the best of his abilities both on and off the football field. Those were better days between father and son - before the madness of the New United Nations and the eventual killing of his dad and thousands of others by the drone bombings in Texas many years ago.

See it. Believe it. Achieve it.

Bear's jaw clenched down and he tightened his grip on the corner of the

truck bed, bending his knees even further. The faces of his wife and two children flashed in his mind, followed by the face of his mother, and again, the voice of his father.

See it. Believe it. Achieve it.

Imran placed the truck in gear, waiting to hear Bear's signal. Mac and the others were peering through the windshield from the front of the truck, barely able to see Bear's head and shoulders as he continued to prepare himself. Cooper whispered to Mac.

“You really think he's strong enough to do this?”

Keeping his gaze on Bear, and fighting the urge to cough, Mac replied to Cooper.

“If it can be done, that man there will do it, or rip his arms from his body trying.”

Dublin was even more direct in her faith regarding Bear’s determination.

“He’ll do it.”

Bear dug his boots into the icy ground below his feet one last time, re-gripped the truck bed, and pulled upward. His eyes were shut tight as his lips pulled back from tightly clenched teeth. He let

out a low growl as his body strained against the weight of the truck bed. Imran let out the clutch and gently tapped the accelerator. The truck inched forward slightly as the right rear wheel Bear stood next to began to spin within the ice it was buried in, causing more chunks to be broken off under the tire's motion.

Sensing the truck was about to settle backwards again, the veins in Bear's neck and forehead popped out with such force it appeared they would rip through his skin as the big man redoubled his effort to lift the back corner of the vehicle. The muscles in his back and shoulders felt as if they were tearing

apart as he let out a scream and for a brief few seconds, Bear feared he was going to pass out. Inhaling as much air as he could, and letting out another scream, Bear pulled upward even further, his legs shaking violently as the truck bed noticeably lifted a few inches.

See it! Believe it! Achieve it!

The large tread of the front tires dug into the ice and the vehicle lurched forward several feet. Bear let go of the truck bed, his body hunched over with his hands on his knees to keep himself from falling over. Imran cheered excitedly from the vehicle's cabin as Dublin looked over at Cooper Wyse with a

small smile on her face.

“Told you.”

And then Bear disappeared...

XIX.

Brando leaped from the truck bed and landed next to the spot Bear had been standing. The Doberman's head and shoulders disappeared into the ice and then re-emerged as the dog's four clawed paws frantically dug into the ice attempting to pull itself backward. Reese was the first to reach the dog and

grab onto the same coat sleeve that Brando now had firmly clutched between his powerful jaws. Within seconds Cooper and Dublin were also next to Reese and Brando, pulling up on Bear's arm as well.

The river's current below the ice was incredibly strong, grabbing at Bear's legs, wanting to pull him completely under. Bear knew if those above the ice let go of him, he would be dead, trapped and buried beneath the ice and carried off to whatever larger body of water the river eventually emptied into. Having expended so much energy lifting the truck bed, Bear actually considered simply letting himself go. He was so

tired. Used up. And the water, though incredibly cold, offered some strange comfort to him. It would be so easy to simply close his eyes and quite literally...drift away.

A sharp pain in his left wrist cut through Bear's quickly receding consciousness, like a life line pulling him back from the beckoning darkness below the ice. He could hear voices shouting from what seemed like a vast distance away, but his mind was telling him they were just above his head and that if he was to see his wife and children again, it was time to once again gather his considerable strength and fight.

Cooper and Reese were able to each grab a part of Bear's coat collar and pull his head above the near-freezing water that was rushing past him as Brando continued to keep hold of Bear's wrist. Mac leaned down and attempted to place a loop of rope under each of Bear's arms, but the distance was too far.

“Got to pull him up a little more! Pull goddammit!”

Reese and Cooper strained to keep hold of Bear's coat as they yanked upward. It was just enough for Mac to secure the rope around Bear's chest. Mac noted the big man was barely moving, his skin was an odd grey-blue, and the pupils of

his half-open eyes appeared to be nearly fully dilated. Mac had seen enough of human death to know Bear was quickly nearing a threshold he may never come back from.

Imran and Dublin both grabbed the rope Mac had just secured around Bear's body and began pulling. Mac, his lungs whistling painfully with each breath he took, quickly grabbed onto the rope as well while Reese and Cooper continued to hold onto Bear's coat collar.

Bear's shoulders and upper body emerged from the ice, and after a few more attempts, the others pulled the rest of him back onto the surface as the sound

of the river's water could be heard rushing past them from the hole he had just moments ago fallen through. The ice appeared to be less than a foot thick in the spot where the truck tire had collapsed into.

“Imran! Crank up the heat! All the way up! Everyone else, help get him inside the truck. Hurry!”

Everyone reacted immediately to Mac's instructions. Reese and Dublin grabbed Bear's right side while Cooper and Mac held onto his left side and dragged him toward the open passenger door of Imran's transport vehicle.

Bear was attempting to move his legs to help the others carry him, but each time his knees would buckle and his body would collapse back onto their shoulders. Getting him into the truck's cabin proved almost as difficult as getting him out of the ice, with Cooper and Imran pulling on him from the driver's side, while Mac and Reese pushed him up from the opposite side. Finally having secured Bear into the seat, Imran tightly wrapped the safety blanket around him.

Bear's eyes opened and he looked down at his left wrist, noting several teeth marks that had almost broken the skin.

“Damn dog...finally got around to biting me.”

Bear attempted a smile but the effort proved too much and he instead simply put his head back and let sleep begin to overtake him. Mac's hand struck Bear hard across his right cheek, causing him to re-awaken, his eyes flashing with anger as he growled a warning to Mac.

“That'll be enough of that shit.”

Mac ignored the threat and looked at Bear intensely, particularly the big man's eyes.

“I want you to lean your head down for a

while, ok? We want as much blood flowing to that mush bowl of yours as possible. Got it?”

Mac didn't wait for Bear to reply, instead pushing on Bear's upper back to move his chest down until his head was nearly touching the dashboard.

“Imran – get this thing moving. Keep the heat on high for at least the next hour. How long until we are out of these ice fields?

Imran looked ahead and then back behind them from where they had just travelled.

“No more than thirty, maybe forty minutes. Then we hit an almost road, so we’ll be able to go much faster. I will have to put more air into the tires then, and some fuel too. Won’t take me more than a few minutes to do that though. Another hour after that, and we will be on a real road heading to Fort Wilfrid.”

Mac nodded and motioned for Dublin to join Imran and Bear in the truck cabin.

“You keep talking to Bear, keep him awake for at least the next twenty minutes or so. He’s past the cold shock period, and he should be ok from hypothermia, but I want you to keep him as alert as possible for a while, ok?”

Dublin simply nodded before going to the other side of the truck to slide past the driver's seat to sit next to Bear. He moved his head to the left and was this time able to manage a brief smile.

“Hey Dublin. Thanks for keeping me company. Sorry for all the trouble back there.”

Dublin attempted to put her right arm around Bear's shoulders but only made it a little over halfway across his broad back.

“No trouble at all Bear. You did it – you lifted the truck up. You got us back

on the road big man.”

“See it. Believe it. Achieve it.”

Dublin didn't understand the meaning of Bear's words.

“What's that Bear?”

“Just something my dad taught me. A long-long time ago...”

Mac gently closed the passenger door as Imran was climbing into the driver's seat. Imran looked back to see the others sitting down in the truck bed, trying to fit under Cooper's horse blanket. Without the safety blanket that

was now wrapped around Bear, it was going to be a cold ride for them back there.

The transport truck once again moved forward across the frozen river, until some fifty yards ahead, it began to make a slow climb up the bank on the other side. True to his recent words to Mac, it was less than thirty minutes later that they reached what Imran had described as an “almost road” – a narrow path through a dense mixture of grass and shrubs, just wide enough for the transport truck to travel through.

Stopping the vehicle, Imran opened his door and removed a small plastic box

from behind his seat. It was the air compressor he had spoken of earlier. The sound of him fully inflating the tires echoed in the otherwise silent and still late afternoon air around them. Once the tires were inflated, Imran took a metallic, reddish colored ten gallon can of diesel and began emptying it into the truck's fuel tank.

As he watched Imran pouring the last of the diesel, Mac asked him where he was able to obtain the fuel. Imran smiled back as he screwed the truck's fuel cap back on and returned the fuel can to its corner in the back of the truck.

“At the station in Wilfrid!”

Mac's eyes betrayed his surprise.

“You have an actual fuel station?”

Imran nodded.

“Oh yes, we have many things there you probably have not seen in a long time. The fuel station is just one. We have a movie theatre, a library, a school, a diner...everything a typical American town would have had years ago. The kind of town the godfather says he grew up in. As I said before – it's similar to what you were doing in Dominatus, just...bigger.”

Mac remained silent for a moment and then peeked through the rear window to look at Bear.

“How’s Bear doing?”

Imran smiled again.

“The big man is doing fine. Tired, but fine.”

Imran then pointed to the back of his truck, his eyes wide with disbelief.

“He lifted it! I’m still...I can’t believe he was able to do such thing!”

Mac looked again through the back

window at Bear, and then Dublin.

“Yeah, that’s one thing that really made Dominatus so special – the people. That said Imran, I’m looking forward to seeing this Fort Wilfrid of yours. So let’s get to going. If you have a hot shower and a cold beer waiting to greet me there, I’ll be a happier man for it.”

Imran clapped both of his hands together and nodded.

“The first round is on me Mr. Mac Walker. The beer – not the shower.”

Soon the transport truck was travelling down Imran’s “almost road” again,

making its way to Fort Wilfrid just as night began to overtake the day. Back at the ice hole Bear had so recently fallen through, a swirling dark mass of seekers gathered, each taking its turn sniffing the area. The largest of the group, the first to arrive days ago at the Wyse ranch, rose to its full height and sniffed the air, its head moving up and down excitedly as it did so. Having confirmed the presence of those they continued to hunt, the seeker opened its freakishly wide mouth, revealing the double-row of jagged teeth. A high pitched whine crept out from that mouth before transforming into a low, gurgling hiss as it extended a lean, well muscled, leathery arm outward where one of its long, claw-like

fingers pointed in the direction Imran's vehicle was now travelling.

The twenty or so other seekers raised their heads together and shrieked as one, the unnervingly almost human sound rising up into the sky. The noise of their cries carried all the way to the back of Imran's transport truck, not so loud that human ears could hear, but loud enough that Brando raised his head and issued a single, low growl.

Cooper Wyse opened his right eye from under the brim of his hat to peer down at his dog, as he gently scratched under the Doberman's chin. While he couldn't hear the seekers' cries himself, Cooper

knew what Brando was warning of.

“Yep - still coming for us aren’t they? Gonna have to tangle with those things sooner rather than later I suppose. Quite a little adventure we got ourselves in, huh? Rather be back at the ranch in front of the fire wouldn’t you?”

Brando growled again.

“Me too, boy. Me too...”

XX.

The Great Consulate sat staring at the

data image inside of his personal office high above the streets of Manhattan at the very top of the New United Nations building. Outside, his drones continued their slow and continuous path across the New York skyline.

“They would cast you aside. Cast you out! After all that you have done for them! All of these years! You allowed them to create this world! You! No-one else could do it! These impudent, ungrateful fools! Destroy them! Destroy them all!”

Despite the voice’s insistence, the Great Consulate knew such a thing would not be so simple. The Saudis were too

powerful to simply go after. They controlled much of the power structure within the New United Nations. They were the majority vote on the Consulate. Despite his title, the Great Consulate had come to realize years ago that there were limits to his power. If the Saudis determined something was not in their own interests, he had little choice but to comply with their request. His personal assistant had told that to him often, even in the earliest years of his rise to power. You can go against the American people, you can destroy the free market, the media, Congress, the Supreme Court, any and all of your political enemies, but you cannot refuse the Saudis.

So she had told him. His assistant. His adviser. The one who to this day was allowed to enter his private residence. The only one allowed to do so.

The Great Consulate's mind wandered back to the time of the Boston bombing. How the Saudis demanded her personally make certain one of their own was released from custody and allowed to return to Saudi Arabia. Some within the administration had warned it would prove a political disaster to do so. The personal assistant bypassed those concerns and took over the situation herself. The young man was released, the profiles were constructed to distract

attention onto the other two, those idiotic Russians, and the task was accomplished within days of its inception. Most importantly, the Saudis were both pleased and impressed.

Today though, the Saudi Royals appeared on the verge of removing the last of his authority from him, and the Great Consulate could not help but wonder if his personal assistant had played an integral part in that process. The data on the wall sized imaging screen made clear the plan. There would be a vote next month to afford him the honorary title of Great Consulate Emeritus. Fucking Saudi bastards. He gave them the world, and they would

now in return, take it all from him.

He knew of the rumors. The whispers within this very building that his mental capacities had diminished. That he had gone mad.

“Who are they to even attempt to understand a god?”

The voice was right of course. It so often was. The Great Consulate was beyond anything the simplistic humans could understand. As he had believed for so long, it was his great privilege and purpose to take care of the billions who were simply unable to do so for themselves. Such privilege demanded

the fundamental transformation of what was then, the old United States, and eventually, the entire world. But now all those who he had helped, all those who continued to live in the safety and security of his drone protected world, would have their benefactor removed from them by the fucking Saudi animals. Look at their words. Their betrayal. Their foolish and preposterous arrogance!

By order of the New United Nations Consulate Majority, we do hereby approve the honorary title of Great Consulate Emeritus effective thirty days from this notice.

The notice had arrived today. The Great Consulate had spent the last two hours reading it and re-reading it. A pile of burnt ash had collected at his feet from the nearly thirty cigarettes he had smoked while doing so.

“Their fear is making them foolish. They blame you for what happened in Dominatus and Alaska, and what is now happening in Texas and elsewhere throughout the former states. You must kill the Dominatus survivors. Kill them before they reach wherever they are going. Prove to the Consulate that you are still capable of decisive and effective action!”

The Great Consulate shouted back at the voice, reminding it he had already attempted to do so.

“I am trying to kill them! You know that! They keep getting away! And the Muslims are already complaining of the drones, so it is up to my seekers now to do what the drones cannot! I’m doing what can be done! Stop telling me what I already know!”

The voice was silent. The Great Consulate felt panic tighten what muscle was left around his wasted, sunken chest. What if the voice, like the Saudis and his assistant, was to betray him too? What if he was finally left truly alone?

What if they came for him? Would they do that? Perhaps they have already decided on it – found him, after so many years of service, to be expendable? Or just as likely, they all feared his power. His divinity over them.

“I will not betray you. Not ever. We must trust each other, you and I.”

The Great Consulate fell to his knees as each of his hands flew to the sides of his head.

“Tell me what to do! What must I do?”

The voice did not respond as the Great Consulate’s words echoed against the

walls of his residence.

“Tell me! Tell me!”

The voice's reply whispered within the Great Consulate's mind with calm assurance.

“Kill them. All of them. Every single pathetic creature. Make this world in your own image, as any god should rightfully do. Release the fire, the ones you hid away all those years ago. You have the codes. They remain active. Do what only you can do. Destroy every living thing that is no longer worthy of you. Embrace and use the power of the god you are and have always been.”

The Great Consulate wept, so grateful he was of the voice's advice. Everything would be fine now, and everyone who ever opposed him would be dealt their deserved punishment. His eyes looked over to the hallway that would lead to his killing room. He needed some time in there with his child seeker. He deserved that time. He wouldn't kill it today. Not just yet. But he would hurt it, and that hurt would feel so very good to him. And after the time in his killing room, which always helped to relax and clear his mind, he would turn his attention back to those Dominatus devils. While the Great Consulate intended to destroy everyone and

everything in this world – he very much wanted to make certain to bring that destruction to them first.

XXI.

The “almost road” finally transformed into a real road. Though broken and cracked in parts from decades without being maintained, it was a real road nevertheless, and everyone inside of Imran’s transport vehicle were grateful to now be traveling upon it.

Imran’s ever present smile remained, as he nudged Dublin to look down at the

speedometer.

“Doing almost sixty miles an hour now! Very good time! Very fast!”

Bear shifted in his seat, his right hand rubbing his left shoulder.

“Hey Imran, you wouldn’t happen to have something for pain would you? This shoulder is killing me. Don’t think lifting the back of this truck up did it any good.”

Without taking his eyes off the road, Imran motioned for Bear to look under the seat.

“Inside the red box. Under where Dublin is sitting. Bottle of Ibuprofen. Take as many as you want.”

Dublin reached down under her seat and removed the small red box Imran referred to. She opened it up and found the Ibuprofen.

“How many of these you want Bear?”

“Give me five of them Dublin. Five now, and another five in a few hours.”

Bear swallowed the pills dry, even crunching some of them between his teeth, his face grimacing at the taste.

“Helps to absorb them faster if I break them up. I used to go through these things like candy back in my football days. Probably didn’t help my liver much, but we didn’t worry about shit like that back then.”

Both Bear and Dublin looked through the windshield at the road illuminated by the headlights. Dublin noted how intensely Imran was looking ahead as well.

“Everything ok Imran?”

The small man glanced to his right at Dublin before returning his focus on the road.

“Yes! Just watching for bandits. They are not common so close to Wilfrid, but, always best to be alert just in case. Especially given the reports they are preparing some kind of invasion into Alaska.”

Bear sat up and looked toward Imran.

“Bandits? You mean Muslims?”

Imran nodded.

“Yes. They like to travel the better roads. Steal supplies.”

Dublin felt a small knot of worry begin to form in her stomach.

“Have you encountered them on this road before Imran?”

The smile fell off of Imran’s face as he answered.

“A few times. They are not well organized, but...can be dangerous. I am under the godfather’s protection though, so normally, that is enough to deter them from harming me. Normally.”

Bear was now focusing on the road in front of them as intently as Imran.

“Normally? What’s that mean?”

Imran tilted his head slightly to the left.

“Well...as I said. With the rumors of the Muslims planning something...who knows? Perhaps they are willing to challenge the old rules? Agreements? I would not worry too much though – I am being overly cautious here. Don’t allow my concern to worsen your own. We will most likely be just fine and arrive at Wilfrid without seeing anyone on this road.”

The sound of the truck’s large tires moving over the rough pavement of the road reverberated inside the cabin. Bear eased himself back down into the seat and placed his head against the cool

glass of the side window. He was growing tired again, and found himself unable to fight off his body's demand for sleep.

When Imran stomped down on the brake pedal, both Bear and Dublin fell forward against the truck's console. In the back of the truck bed, the shouts from the other three men could be heard as well as they too were propelled forward.

Imran shut off the headlights but left the truck idling as it sat in the middle of the road.

In the distance, perhaps no more than ten

miles away, the glow of multiple lights could be seen cutting through the night's darkness.

Mac had already jumped down from the truck bed with his gun drawn, his instincts for impending trouble already kicking in. The other two were somewhat slower to react, but soon Reese and Cooper were standing near the truck with their own weapons out as well. Imran opened the driver's door and stepped out to stand next Cooper as both Bear and Dublin made their way down from the truck cabin.

Mac was staring intently at something ahead of their position and then pointed

to the lights.

“That Fort Wilfrid?”

Imran gave one brief nod. He too was focusing on whatever he thought was directly in front of them.

Brando stood motionless directly to Cooper Wyse’s right side, the Doberman’s attention also indicating he sensed someone or something was out there.

Mac motioned for the others to step behind the transport truck, his voice whispering to them as he did so.

“We are being watched.”

As he moved slowly to a position behind the truck, with his right hand holding one of his two six shooters in front of him, Cooper strained to see confirmation of what Mac has just told him.

“How do you know that, Mac?”

Mac crouched down and placed his left hand on the pavement.

“Just a feeling. Been on ambush roads just like this so many times before...you just develop a sense for it.”

Imran pointed off into the darkness as he

whispered back to the others.

“I saw a light on the road. It was there and then it went out. Maybe...a hundred yards ahead.”

Brando suddenly turned around, his now familiar low growl warning of something behind them.

Mac followed the dog's gaze. Reese noted how calm and measured Mac became when danger became more imminent. He had watched Mac transform into that person during the darkest moments during the attacks on Dominatus.

“Ok. Whoever they are, looks like they split into two groups. One remained in front of us, the other is making their way behind us. That means there are fewer of them up ahead on the road, so I suggest we get back into the truck, get as low inside of it as possible, and drive the motherfucker right through them. We want to keep the headlights off Imran – you ok to drive in the dark?”

Imran, though no longer smiling, appeared satisfied with Mac’s plan.

“No problem Mac Walker. I have this road memorized. So...you want me to drive as fast as possible, is that right?”

Mac nodded.

“Yeah...get us moving as fast as you can and don't stop until we reach Wilfrid. If we do have to stop...if whoever is up there is able to force us to stop, everyone of you jumps out of this truck guns blazing. And shoot to kill. No holding back. We all understand?”

Everyone nodded back at Mac before moving as silently as possible back into the vehicle. Imran and Mac returned to the truck cabin, while the rest laid down in the back of the truck bed.

With the headlights left off as Mac had instructed, Imran placed the truck into

gear and pushed down on the accelerator. The transport vehicle lurched forward, picking up speed as Imran ran through the remaining few gears.

The first few shots fired at them came from behind. They watched the flash of gunfire followed by the sound of bullets ripping the air just above them. Then more shots came from directly in front of them. At least two bullets hit the long hood of the Imran's truck, causing sparks to temporarily ignite against the WWII era steel. Mac and Imran sat as low as possible in the seats – just enough to allow them to peek out through the windshield.

“Keep on going Imran. You’re doing great.”

Imran managed a small smile at Mac’s compliment, though the thin sheet of sweat forming on his forehead betrayed the stress of the moment. Yet more gunfire came from behind them, with several bullets striking the transport vehicles trailer bed. The thick steel prevented any from passing through.

More bullets struck the hood, and one hit the windshield, passed through the cabin no more than a foot above Mac’s head, before plugging somewhere in the passenger door frame. Mac’s eyes

glanced upward and then he smiled.

“Good thing these Muslims are such shitty shots, huh?”

Imran could see the outline of a dilapidated vehicle no more than twenty yards ahead, parked directly in the middle of the road. It appeared to be an old light blue Chevy truck from the 1970's. One man stood to the left of the truck, while two more stood just to the right of it. All of them were carrying AK-47 rifles.

Imran pressed down on the truck's accelerator even further as the darkness ahead was illuminated by several more

rounds of gunfire. Imran deftly maneuvered the transport truck to the left of the parked Chevy as the three armed men scrambled to get out of the way. His smile returning as enthusiastic as ever, Imran glanced over to Mac.

“Looks like we are by them!”

Mac nodded as he turned to glance behind them. He saw two of the three men getting back up from the ground where they had dove to avoid being hit by Imran’s truck as it passed them.

Without warning, the truck stumbled momentarily, once again causing everyone inside of it to be pushed

forward. The vehicle lurched again, and then again, before coming to a stop as its engine died completely. From the back Bear's voice could be heard issuing yet another complaint.

“Oh for the love of God you got to be kidding me! Can't a guy catch just one fucking break around here?”

Shouting could be heard no more than thirty or forty yards behind where Imran's truck had stalled.

Mac had already exited the truck with his handgun at the ready, as the others soon did the same.

“Want everyone to get behind the truck again. Good news is we know all of them are behind us now. That makes targeting easier. Bad news is, well... we’re here.”

More shouting came from behind them. Bear scowled as he turned to Imran.

“You understand what they’re saying? Is that Arabic?”

Mac responded before Imran could.

“Yeah – Somali Arabic actually, though there’s a bit of Yemeni accent to it.”

Though he had long since learned not to

be surprised at Mac's many talents, Reese could not help but be so again.

“I figured you understood Arabic, but you can actually recognize accents from different parts of the Middle East too?”

Mac tilted his head in the direction of the still shouting voices from behind them.

“Sure – no different than you being able to recognize different accents in the United States. I got my Louisiana thing going...which sounds a lot different than someone from say, Tennessee, and even more different than some asshole from Boston, right?”

Everyone but Brando instinctively ducked as several bullets struck the back of Imran's truck.

“They are telling us to surrender. That they won't harm us if we give up what we own.”

Imran stood up again and yelled back in Arabic at the group of Muslim bandits. Mac told the rest of the group what Imran has just said.

“He told them they are attacking a friend of the godfather's and that he is under the godfather's protection and that if they simply leave us alone, and let us be on

our way, Imran won't inform that godfather of what they have done.”

The bandits grew momentarily silent after Imran's communication to them before one of the bandits responded.

Mac's eyes widened slightly at what was spoken.

“They say they have a grenade launcher. An RPG, and they will blow us to Allah if they have to.”

“Bullshit. They would have already done it if they had one.”

Cooper Wyse glanced at Bear and then

back to Mac.

“Not necessarily Bear – not if they are hoping to get at whatever they think we might have all in one piece. “

Imran shook his head as he whispered back to Mac.

“These bandits, they aren’t armed with such things. A few old guns, yes. Machetes, knives, absolutely. But a grenade launcher? I have not seen such a thing from them.”

Dublin placed her hand on Imran’s arm.

“What about your friends in Fort

Wilfrid? They're only about ten miles away. Could you use the shortwave to call them and ask for help?"

Imran shook his head.

"No...inside the walls of Wilfrid we are protected. The godfather does not spend resources dealing with problems outside those walls. He would not help me, even though he considers me his friend. If he were to try and control the atrocities that took place around him, he would soon run out of what he needs to protect himself and his own community. If we can make our way to Wilfrid, we will be safe. Until then...we are on our own. It has always been that way for

me.”

The bandits were shouting again – repeating the same threat of using the grenade launcher.

Mac covered his mouth as he felt yet another cough forming in his lungs. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath, waiting for the cough to pass. He then turned to Imran.

“I want you to ask them for proof they have that RPG. Tell them you are carrying a shit load of valuables and you aren’t willing to just give it up without a fight, but you will give it up if you have to. They got to put up or shut up. While

you're telling them that, I'm gonna make my way around them, ok? So you shout what you're telling them. Be loud about it. Be convincing. I want them shooting off that launcher. Now if they don't fire it off, then that means they are bluffing and we have ourselves a good old fashioned firefight. Spread out – at least ten yards apart from each other, and light them Muslim bastards up.”

Imran nodded to Mac as the former Navy SEAL began to crawl slowly away from the truck, his form disappearing into the darkness. Imran stood up again to shout back at the bandits what Mac had instructed him to say.

Reese nudged Dublin while they waited for a response.

“You make sure to stay close to me, ok?”

Dublin offered him a small smile.

“Right back at you.”

Cooper leaned down next to Imran, a slightly confused expression covering his face.

“Now what are we are supposed to do if those bandits out there do fire off a rocket? I don’t recall Mac saying anything about that. He just said he

wanted them to, but why?”

The group again went silent as they contemplated the question. Imran appeared to be the most troubled at the plan that now appeared to have been hatched unwisely.

Bear peered out at the darkness, hoping to see where the bandits were gathered. He was unable to do so, but soon heard one of them yelling back at them. The big man looked down at Imran so he could know what was being said.

“He says they are preparing to prove to us they have what they say they have. They also want us to know they have

many more they can launch. If we don't give up after they fire off the first rocket, the next one will be fired at us. They also say...they say that Allah is with them and that we will be punished for our crimes. That if there are women with us...that they will be raped. If there are children...they will be killed along with the rest of us. Their throats will be cut, and their blood offered as sacrifice. He says we are not innocents, but rather sinful participants in the war that is now coming - a new jihad on the Alaskan infidels and that no friend, no godfather can stop Allah's demand for justice."

Cooper Wyse chuckled.

“So these fellas are the friendly sort, huh?”

Imran continued to interpret what the bandit was yelling back at them.

“He also says they saw the dog that was with us, and that they will very much enjoy eating it over a fire before the night is done.”

Cooper’s eyes narrowed as his left hand removed the second six shooter from its holster that hung from his left hip.

“They just threaten my dog, Imran?”

Imran gave a slow nod.

Yes...they will eat Brando.”

Cooper glanced down at Brando and then back to Imran.

“I didn’t think Muslims ate dog.”

Imran shrugged.

“These Muslims, they are the worst of the worst, they make their own rules.”

Cooper Wyse’s eyes glared out into the darkness.

“Ok then...”

Bear half whispered, half hissed at hearing Cooper's sudden seriousness over Brando being threatened.

“Those Muslim scumbags can shout out how they're going to kill all of us and you sit there laughing it off like it's no big thing, but as soon as they mention your dog, you bring out that second gun of yours and look like you're ready to kill every one of them? What the hell is that about?”

Cooper continued to stare ahead while calmly answering Bear's accusation of his seemingly misplaced priorities.

“I could give a mouse fart in the wind about some grubby wanna be bandits making threats against other people, but you don’t threaten to eat a man’s dog. That kind of thing, well...that just ain’t right.”

A flash of deep orange-yellow light momentarily illuminated the night forty yards behind the group followed by an arc of fire that sped off before ending in a much larger explosion a hundred yards or so further away to the right of where the group was hunkered down behind Imran’s truck. The explosion lit up the area for a few seconds before darkness once again fell over them.

As soon as the full return of that darkness was complete, several rapid fire gunshots were heard to their left. Reese noted at least six shots were fired, followed by a momentary pause, and then four more gunshots, replaced by a prolonged silence. Reese whispered one brief word to the others.

“Mac.”

No further shouting came from the bandits. No sounds of movement - just silence within the inky blackness of night. The few minutes following the last of the gunfire passed very slowly for each of them crouched behind the transport vehicle.

Brando was the first to sense something approaching from the left – the same direction Mac had earlier snuck away to. The Doberman did not growl, but rather wagged his short, cropped tail. Though he looked every bit his seventy five years of age, there was just a hint of satisfied lightness in Mac's steps as he made his way back to the group.

Cooper Wyse's eyebrows rose slightly as the right corner of his mouth curled up into the faintest of grins. He wasn't one to impress easily, but on this night, Mac Walker had done just that.

Imran, as he was with Bear's feat of

strength earlier, was far more open and expressive in his admiration for Mac's action against the Muslim bandits.

“Did you kill them all? By yourself? Praise God for you, Mr. Mac Walker!”

Mac brushed aside the compliment and admiring looks, and pointed to Imran's truck.

“You need to see if you can get that thing running Imran. Those bandits up there had communicators. They're might be more of them on their way here. We need to get ourselves to Fort Wilfrid and hope it's as safe a place for us as you say it is.”

While Imran moved quickly to the front of his truck and raised the hood to try and determine what had caused it to stall, Dublin stepped toward Mac and placed her hand on his shoulder.

“How were you able to shoot at them so accurately Mac when it’s so dark out?”

Mac put his right arm around Dublin’s shoulders and gave her a gentle squeeze.

“No – it wasn’t. At least not for a few seconds, and that’s all I needed. As soon as they fired off that launcher, I could see where each one of them was standing. There were five total. I hit the

first three right off, all head shots. The last two, they hit the dirt and were trying to crawl away. Dumb as they were, they were crawling right next to each other. Made things pretty damn easy for me. Had to wait until the rocket detonated, and once that happened, there they were plain as day. No more than thirty yards away from my position. Four shots fired. Three found their mark. Last one missed but I didn't need it. Both dead.”

Imran called out from under the truck's hood.

“Got it! No problems! Easy fix! The redundant check valve in the fuel line was hit by a bullet! I can just bypass it

and we should be good to go again!
Give me five minutes!”

Bear looked over at the others in the group.

“What the hell is he going on about?”

Cooper Wyse, who had returned his two six shooters to their respective holsters, tipped his head in Imran’s direction.

“Sounds like he’s saying we’ll be good to go soon. If anything mechanical needs fixing, Imran there is the one to do it.”

Imran had ventured back to the truck cabin where he again looked behind the

seat and came out with a roll of something silver in his right hand.

“Duct tape! Best quick fix in the world!”

With that big grin and a task allowing for the use of duct tape, Imran looked at that particular moment like he could quite possibly be the happiest man on earth. Within a few minutes, the small man was back behind the wheel of the transport vehicle and turning the ignition key. The motor fired up, and then stalled. Imran looked back at the others and nodded.

“It’s ok – just a little air in the injectors. No worries. Princess is almost ready.”

The ignition was turned again and the motor came to life and this time remained idling.

Bear and Dublin again joined Imran in the cabin as the others crawled up into the truck bed. Within minutes, as the lights of Wilfrid quickly drew closer, they passed a large, neatly painted green and white metallic sign on the side of the road with the following inscription:

**WELCOME TO WILFRID – THE
LAST REAL HOMETOWN ON
EARTH**

XXII.

Imran slowed the transport truck as he neared what appeared to be a checkpoint with two guard stations bookending each side of the road. Two men, both carrying M-16s, held up their hands for Imran to stop.

Imran rolled down his window and offered his all too familiar smile, calling out to each man by their names.

“Hello again Jackson! Timothy! Good to see you! I have arrived with my guests. They have been invited by the godfather himself.”

The taller of the two guards, Jackson, peered into the truck cabin at Imran, Bear, and Dublin, while the one called Timothy stood toward the back, looking into the truck bed. Jackson was just under six foot, and appeared to be in his mid-thirties. He had a round, cleanly shaven face, with friendly, brown eyes, and small scar that crossed the bottom of his chin. He and his wife had fled the suburbs of Vancouver and took up residence in Wilfrid nearly six years ago. They welcomed their first child, Jackson Jr., into the world just four months ago.

“Nice to see you Imran! We’ve been

given notice to expect you to bring back some friends. Do they have names?”

Imran, still smiling, pointed to his right.

“This is Dublin Meyer, and Bear...from Alaska. In the back we have Mr. Mac Walker, Mr. Cooper Wyse, and Mr. Reese Neeson...of the radio program.”

Jackson smiled warmly back at Dublin and Bear and then looked down at a paper printout that he had removed from inside his winter jacket.

“Ok, thank you Imran – names all check out. Those are the ones we were expecting to arrive. Say, was there

some kind of explosion out there? We saw the flash, but that was it. Then you all arrived here about ten minutes later.”

Imran’s face grew serious.

“Yes – bandits. And they were well armed Jackson. AK-47’s, and a functioning grenade launcher.”

Jackson’s eyes grew larger as he processed what Imran was telling him.

“Bandits? This close to Wilfrid? AK’s and a grenade launcher? That’s certainly out of the ordinary. I’ll be sure to send a group out in the morning to look over the site Imran, pick up any

weapons that are still working. We got double security going, so no worries for now. We'll be watching out for all of you. Just enjoy your time here at Wilfrid."

Jackson nodded to the other guard, Timothy, and then waived Imran past the check point. The road past the checkpoint was noticeably smoother, having been recently re-paved. Bright yellow painted lines divided the lanes, and multi-colored plants were spaced out evenly on both sides of the road every forty feet or so.

Imran pointed into the darkness on either side of them.

“This whole area has motion sensors and hidden, in ground lighting that comes on if anyone attempts to sneak into Wilfrid. The sensors are calibrated so that smaller animals don’t set them off, but a person would. Very good system. I helped design it! Now if you look up ahead, those lights you see that are all in a row...those are actual Boston street lamps from 1954! The godfather obtained a bunch of city surplus containers that were sitting on a barge tied up in Lake Michigan, of all places! He had them delivered all the way back here. There were street lights, signs, bricks, even a couple of false store fronts. It was a remarkable find! Very

expensive to transport...but in the end, worth it.”

Dublin and Bear marveled at the world that was revealed to them under the old world lighting of Wilfrid’s meticulously paved Main Street as Imran’s truck passed slowly by Mitchell and Son’s Hardware, the Wilfrid Library, a large, three story, red bricked building with a sign above the massive wooden double doors that read,

“Wilfrid Schools – Great Minds For A Better Future”.

In the back of the transport truck, Mac, Reese, and Cooper were standing up in

the truck bed, leaning against the canopy and staring at the same buildings Dublin and Bear were. Mac's mouth was left open like a child's on Christmas morning as he stared at a world that reminded him of his long ago childhood growing up in Carville, Louisiana in the 1960's.

“Son-of-a-bitch.”

Cooper clapped Mac on the back.

“It's different, that's for sure. Hell, you're old enough you'd fit right in here Mac!”

Mac didn't bother to respond as he

continued to be amazed at how well this modern day Wilfrid had re-created what used to be small town America.

Reese pointed to a row of cars parked outside a brightly polished, silver train car that had been transformed into Mel's Diner.

“Look at those cars. That's a Cadillac. And there's a Buick. The silver one on the end there...not sure what it is, but it's beautiful.”

Mac followed to where Reese was pointing and smiled.

“That's a Continental Mark II. 1956.

Rare car. And you're right – she's a beauty. Back when American-made still meant something. Hell...back when American meant something.”

Imran turned off of Main Street and onto what the signage indicated was Acorn Drive, which was clearly a residential street that had meticulously maintained yards upon which large, equally pristine, two-story Craftsman styled homes stood with warm glowing lights peeking out through lace-curtained windows.

“This is one of our better neighborhoods. Beautiful homes here. Very nice street, and close to the school.”

Dublin was peering intently at the yards, her experience and love of plants telling her something was not quite right with the uniformity of the grass, shrubs, and trees.

“Imran – is that grass real?”

Imran gave several quick shakes of his head.

“Oh no...too cold up here most of the year to grow grass, or most plants outside...what you are looking at is all artificial. Even the trees are fabrications. Very good fabrications... but fabrications nevertheless. People do

like to add or remove plants though, or change the color of the grass a little... you know, personalize their yards that way.”

While Dublin was impressed with how realistic the grass and plant life looked, she would much rather be able to work real earth, and grow real things in that earth, as God had intended.

“What do you do for food Imran? You must have some kind of greenhouse facility?”

Imran smiled again and nodded.

“Yes we do! Twenty thousand square

feet of growing space. Every kind of edible plant you could imagine! It is owned by the same family that owns the Wilfrid Market. Very nice people. Hard workers.”

Imran slowed the truck down and turned right into the very last home on Acorn Drive. A single porch light illuminated the driveway and walking path to the home's covered porch entry that was framed by two very large, white, square pillars.

Bear peered through the truck windshield toward the house and then looked over at Imran.

“What are we doing here?”

Imran was already opening his door to step outside onto the home’s flawless, red bricked driveway.

“This is the Wilfrid Guest House. You will be able to stay here for as long as you like. Rest. Clean up. Have something to eat. There are five fully furnished rooms, three bathrooms, a fully functional and stocked kitchen, a formal dining room, living room, study, and music room. This used to be the godfather’s residence – and he loves his music. I will be back here tomorrow at noon to pick you up and take you to the godfather.”

Mac, Cooper, and Reese had already stepped down from the truck bed and were standing next to Imran. Mac looked toward the stained wood front door and gave an approving nod.

“Sounds good to me Imran. We just let ourselves in and have at it?”

Imran nodded.

“Yes! Let me help you with your things.”

After the packs had been removed from the back of Imran’s transport truck and brought inside the house, Cooper stood

with Imran on the covered porch as Brando sat next him.

“Brando’s staying in the house with me, high dollar carpets be damned. You know that, right?”

Imran looked down at Brando with warm affection.

“Of course Cooper. You don’t need to ask that. Brando is always welcome here.”

Cooper peered out toward the street, and then beyond the lights of Wilfrid.

“How safe are we here really, Imran? Is

that Muslim invasion, uprising, whatever you called it – is that really gonna happen? Never heard of bandits doing business so close to Wilfrid before. Thought they had too much fear of the godfather for that. Tells me things are different out here now than they used to be.”

Imran glanced back inside the house where the others were organizing their packs and looking at the food in the kitchen before he whispered his reply to Cooper Wyse.

“Have things changed in that regard? Yes. Are we still safe here in Wilfrid? I believe we are as safe here as

anywhere right now. The godfather is aware of the threat. He has taken precautions.”

Cooper rolled his eyes just slightly at Imran’s assurance the godfather had things under control.

“You mean that increase in patrols or whatever? You really think that’s gonna keep a few hundred, or maybe a few thousand, of those Muslim fanatics out there from running up here with guns blazing? Hell Imran, you saw it. Those bandits had a damn rocket launcher! And AK-47’s! Something’s brewing. Something big, and you and I both know, this place has to be very high on their

target list. The godfather has made it very clear for a very long time how much he hates the Muslims.”

Imran’s tone betrayed a hint of frustration over Cooper’s words.

“For good reason he hates them. We all do. They are animals. Bloody, brutal, animals, brought here to create the very chaos we now live in. Do not underestimate the godfather’s determination or his preparation, Cooper. You don’t know him – I do. He is well prepared. There are things I will not...that I cannot tell you on that. But if we are to defend ourselves against the Muslims, you will know then just

how prepared we are. Wilfrid is a place of safety for everyone who calls it their home. For now, that includes you and your friends, so be appreciative of that fact.”

Cooper smiled down at his business partner.

“Oh, I appreciate it just fine Imran. I’m just worried you all have grown soft here. I don’t want to find out, if things really do get as ugly as I think they might...I don’t want to find out that all this preparation you’re going on about now is as fake as the grass that’s not growing in this here yard.”

Imran extended his right hand toward Cooper.

“Goodnight Cooper. I will see all of you again tomorrow at noon.”

Cooper took Imran’s hand into his own while staring into the smaller man’s eyes.

“We aim to be out of here before long Imran. Make sure the godfather understands that, ok? We ain’t some new goods that have arrived here for him to use. I appreciate the hospitality – but we have our own mission. Places to get to as fast as we can, and I don’t intend to let anyone stop us from doing

that. For the first time since they killed my family, I feel like I got a real chance to help make things better with this world. I've been waiting a very long time for that, and nobody is gonna keep me from helping make it happen."

Imran stepped back from Cooper and nodded.

"I know that Cooper. I know how much you want to help with the mission to get yourselves to the priest. I am helping you with that too. I give you my word."

Cooper sensed the sincerity in Imran's voice, and the concern in his eyes.

“Your word is good enough for me Imran. Always has been.”

Imran turned to walk down the steps of the porch, his right hand waiving behind him.

“Goodnight my friend. Until tomorrow.”

Cooper Wyse watched as the transport truck backed out of the driveway and onto the street, and then slowly drove off into the night. His eyes again travelled off into the darkness well beyond Wilfrid.

This whole place and everyone in it was in danger. He didn't know when, or

how, but something was coming.
Something big.

XXIII.

Bear was already scavenging in the kitchen for a meal. As promised, both the fridge and pantry were stocked with meats, breads, eggs, vegetables, fruit, and even a gallon of vanilla ice cream in the freezer.

“Ok, I’m cooking up some eggs, bacon, and toast. I know it’s dinner time, but I’m craving breakfast. That ok with everyone?”

Mac told Bear fine, as he walked out of the pantry with a six pack of bottled Budweiser.

“Look at this! They got Bud! Man, I haven’t cracked one of these open in almost twenty years! How the hell... they must be brewing their own beer here and re-using the old bottles. It wouldn’t keep that long.”

Mac opened a bottle and brought it to his nose as a slow smile worked its way to each side of his face.

“I’ll be damned. Sure smells like what I remember.”

The bottle was then brought to his mouth as Mac took a small sip, letting the beer sit on his tongue for a moment.

“I don’t know how they did it – but boys and girls, that there is Budweiser, and I know for a fact the last bottle of that stuff was brewed years ago. Beer don’t keep much past a year, so they got to be brewing it new somewhere, and that sure as hell tastes like a Bud.”

Bear grabbed a bottle from the six pack and opened it up, throwing the beer back in one large gulp until two-thirds of it was gone.

“Yup. Tastes like beer. Need to put it in the fridge though. I like mine cold.”

Mac took the open bottle, and another unopened one, and walked to the living room where he offered the second bottle to Cooper, who was starting a fire in the large fireplace that was the centerpiece of the room. Brando had already laid down in front of it in anticipation of the heat.

“Why thank you Mac, don’t mind if I do.”

Both men sat down in matching pale yellow chairs. Cooper slowly ran a hand along the fabric.

“These aren’t reproductions – they’re the real deal.”

Mac took another sip of beer and looked down at his own chair.

“Yeah – they’re chairs. Seem comfortable enough. What of it?”

Cooper Wyse continued to look closely at the chair’s fabric.

“These are actual chairs from the 1950’s. Scandinavian design. These were the chairs of choice for the upper middle class back then. Pretty rare thing to see a set like this in such good

condition. Goes with the theme of Wilfrid though, doesn't it? They've recreated a world that hasn't existed for over eighty years."

Mac tilted his head and looked at Cooper as if he had suddenly turned into a dancing chicken.

"Now how does some horse training cowboy rancher from Juneau know that much about a goddamn piece of furniture?"

Cooper leaned further into his chair, stretched out his legs in front of him, lowered his hat over his just closed eyes, and took another drink of beer.

“I read a lot. And I make a living, at least in part, tracking down and delivering stuff people want, and from time to time, that includes certain types of furniture.”

Mac waived a dismissive hand in Cooper’s direction and finished off his own beer.

“To each his own. Whatever floats your boot-wearing boat Coop.”

Cooper smiled, his eyes still closed.

“Amen to that Mac. To each his own...”

Reese and Dublin had ventured upstairs, marveling at how clean every inch of the home was. Every throw rug over the dark wood floors was immaculate, every piece of trim without a scratch. Each of the five bedrooms was a different shade of either yellow, or blue. The largest of the bedrooms was downstairs and had its own adjoining bathroom. The second largest bedroom was upstairs and it too had its own private bath. The three remaining rooms upstairs shared a hall bath.

Dublin walked into the larger upstairs bedroom and sat on the steel framed queen sized. The walls were a light blue, and a large window overlooked

the driveway below. Reese sat next to Dublin, put his right arm around her, and gently squeezed her shoulders.

“Quite a house.”

Dublin gave a small nod as she rested her chin against Reese’s chest. She sat back up and looked at Reese and then toward the room’s window.

“You think we’re gonna make it all the way out to Manitoba Reese? To that priest? It still seems so surreal sometimes. It wasn’t more than a month ago we were in Anchorage wondering if we might want to go back to Dominatus, build a new home there, and now we’re

out here in the middle of nowhere in Canada. The drone attacks. Those things screaming in the woods. Poor Bear falls through the ice. The bandits. And now we're sitting here in this beautiful home in a town that that looks like it's from a time my grandfather would have been a young man in. I'm trying to wrap my mind around all of it but...I don't know."

Reese didn't respond to Dublin's comment right away. He too was feeling as if things had moved so incredibly fast for them the last few days, as if sometimes he was outside of himself watching everything as it happened. Instead, he leaned his face into Dublin's

hair and simply allowed himself the pleasure of her being there with him at this moment.

As the smell of the meal Bear was cooking up crept into the room, Reese stood up and walked over to the window and then turned back around to face Dublin.

“How about we call dibs on this room for the night? That bed looks pretty comfortable.”

Dublin gave a sly smile and bounced on the bed a few times.

“It feels sturdy.”

Reese's eyes opened wide in mock surprise.

“Why Ms. Dublin Meyer, I do believe you've turned into something of a woman of ill repute.”

Dublin fell back onto the bed and spread her arms out across the thick, cream colored blanket.

“I stopped caring about my repute years ago Reese. You done corrupted me with your big city ways.”

Reese walked over to the bed and leaned down to kiss Dublin's lips.

“I aim to please.”

Dublin’s mouth frowned slightly as she looked back up into Reese’s eyes.

“Well...it took you a while, but your aim has gotten a little better. Just a little...”

Reese stood back up and nodded toward the door.

“And on that note, I think I’ll go back downstairs and get a bite of food before Bear eats it all. Just in case I need my strength later tonight.”

Dublin jumped up from the bed and

walked with Reese out into the hallway, taking his hand into her own.

XXIV.

Mac looked up into the bright, warm Louisiana sunshine of his small backyard. He could hear his mother preparing lunch in the kitchen that was just inside the small poured concrete patio where his dad would barbeque his favorite spiced chicken wings every Friday afternoon for family and friends who would visit, drink, and talk late into the evening while Mac's mom would tell everyone to stop cursing in front of the

children.

It was mid-July, and the weather forecast was for temperatures to reach nearly ninety degrees by late afternoon. The humidity was causing Mac's t-shirt to cling to his chest. It was the kind of day his dad called "hotter than a billy goat in a pepper patch."

Mac could hear his mother walking outside from the kitchen. He turned to see her dressed in the light blue summer dress with the white lace collar she wore so often this time of year. Her reddish hair was tied neatly behind her and her lean, unlined face smiled down at him with the love and affection Mac

had always remembered emanating from her. Where his father's moods could quickly turn dark, Betty Walker seemed perpetually in good spirits, even during times of challenge, and in 1973, there was plenty of challenge facing the people of Carville, Louisiana.

In his mother's hands she carried a paper plate with a simple peanut butter and jelly sandwich cut neatly in half with the crust taken off, just as Mac liked it. On the side she had placed four apple slices sprinkled lightly with cinnamon. While the thousand or so adults of Carville faced uncertain economic times and still rampant racial tensions, for kids like nine year old Mac

Walker, the place was a refuge of small town simplicity tucked away just a short drive from the big city of Baton Rouge, alongside the banks of the Mighty Mississippi. Mac's father, Merle Walker, was an assistant administrator at the Carville Leprosy hospital, a facility that had, by 1973, served patients of that terrible disease for nearly a hundred years.

“You make sure to come inside if it gets too hot out here Mackenzie. There's cold lemonade in the fridge if you want. Just remember to wash out your glass and put it in the sink when you're done.”

Mac's mother always called him by his

full name. To everyone else, he was simply Mac.

Her thin fingers tousled Mac's blonde-brown hair before she turned to walk back into the house. Mac watched her go, and then focused fully on the food. As was his habit, he took each of the apple slices and placed them inside the sandwich, two for each of the halves. Having completed that task, both sides were soon to be devoured.

Mac remembered last summer when he felt his father's eyes staring at him as he placed the apple slices in between the slices of white Wonder Bread as he had just done.

“Mac – why don’t you just have your mother put the apple slices in the sandwich when she’s making it?”

His father’s voice had always scared Mac. It issued forth from him like a deep, scratchy rumble that often bordered on an outright shout.

“Answer your father Mackenzie.”

Mac had looked to his mother and then glanced back at his dad. He feared if he stared too long into the hazel green eyes that looked out from behind his father’s thick framed glasses, they would find something wrong that would cause him

to yell at Mac.

“Well...if Mom did it, then I wouldn’t get to do it myself.”

Mac’s dad sat looking down at his son for what seemed to Mac like an eternity. Finally he looked over at Betty and smiled, while pointing a finger back at Mac.

“That makes sense to you honey?”

Betty placed a hand on her husband’s knee and looked down at Mac and smiled.

“Why yes, I think it makes perfect

sense.”

Merle Walker looked back at Betty and then down at his son and smiled as well.

“Ok then – fair enough.”

Today though, Mac was able to finish the sandwich without being watched. Or so he thought. From the back of the yard, emerging from the shadows of the old Juniper tree that Mac had spent hours climbing for as long as he could remember, a tall ,uniformed bald man was walking toward him. There was a light blue patch on the upper right chest of the man’s uniform, and he was grinning so widely, Mac thought the man

might be able to touch each of his ears with both sides of his mouth. The smile reminded Mac of illustrations of the Big Bad Wolf. He even had a row of abnormally large, white teeth. Though only nine years old, Mac already sensed the man was very dangerous to him.

Instinctively he turned to look back toward the house, where he knew the safety of his mother could be found. To Mac's horror, his house was no longer there. Behind him now were only miles of dessert – the sanded wastelands of Libya, just outside Benghazi.

You're dreaming.

Mac told himself what he was seeing wasn't real. He had been dreaming of his childhood and then for some reason he was now dreaming of Benghazi. Mac turned to see the soldier still approaching him from the back of the yard.

“Hello again Mac. I told you I would be seeing you again, in a way at least. That gift I promised you. I'm here to make sure it was delivered. Once a gift is promised, it must be delivered, right Mr. Walker?”

Mac looked down at his hands and saw they were still those of a nine year old boy. At the same time, his dreaming

consciousness was screaming the name of the tall man with the wolf-smile that now stood over him. It was the man who had come to Dominatus two years ago, and brought with him the destruction and horror of the drones. The man who Mac had personally fought in hand to hand combat atop the frozen ground of the Alaskan wilderness.

“Stand up Mac. Stand up and look at me.”

Mac didn't want to stand, but in his dream, his limbs were no longer his own. He kept his eyes looking to the ground as he felt himself rise up. August Hess was no more than a foot away from

him. Mac could feel his warm breath on top of his head.

“Look at me.”

Mac screamed for his head not to look up, screamed for his eyes to close tight and not look at the monster, but they wouldn't listen.

August Hess's wide grin grew even wider, and Mac caught a glimmer of something metallic in Hess's dark eyes.

“Here's your gift Mac. Just as I promised you back in the cave. Back in Dominatus.”

The knife slowly cut through and pushed into the center of Mac's nine year old chest, until it was sunk hilt-deep. There was no real pain, just an odd sense of pressure, as if something was sitting on top of him making it difficult to breathe.

August Hess placed both of his hands on each of Mac's shoulders, and leaned down so they were face to face.

“You're no different than me Mac. Never were, and you never will be. And you're right you know...there is no god. Just darkness. Terrible, black, unending darkness. And me. Oh yes, I'll be there Mac. I'll always be there in you. At least what's left after I'm done

eating you from the inside.”

August Hess’s mouth continued to spread wider and wider, and now instead of the large, white, human teeth he had revealed before, his mouth was full of little gleaming daggers that curved backward toward his throat.

“Get away from my boy you fucking monster!”

The voice of Mac’s father bellowed from behind, and August Hess took a startled step backward. Mac felt the arms of his mother grab him up as he saw his dad step between him and August Hess.

Merle Walker was not a terribly big man, but his mother had told Mac once that he knew well enough how to handle himself. His father had spent two terribly cold and brutal winters in Korea during that war, and it was there, his mom said, that Mac's father had left whatever innocence was left in him back in the bloodied snows of that war torn country.

As he was being carried back by his mother into their house, the knife still sticking from his chest, Mac watched as his father grabbed August Hess and threw him to the ground, his right hand repeatedly striking Hess's face. Mac

was having more difficulty breathing as Betty Walker set her son onto the couch in the living room. She did not appear panicked, only sad as she placed a small pillow under Mac's head and attempted to straighten the hair that had fallen over his forehead.

Mac's father soon joined Betty as he too looked down at his son while placing his bloodied right hand around his wife's waist.

“August Hess is gone Mac. He won't come back here anymore.”

Mac began to cough uncontrollably, and felt warm blood oozing from the corner

of his mouth and run down his chin. He began to panic as it quickly became more difficult for him to breathe.

“Ssshhhhh now Mackenzie. It’ll be all right. Just rest now. Soon enough, it’ll be all right. You’ll be back home soon.”

Mac’s mother took a cool, wet cloth and dabbed the blood away from her son’s chin and mouth.

“Don’t tell him that. He still has work to do.”

Betty Walker turned angrily toward her husband, her voice rising up against the words of Mac’s father.

“He’s done enough already! This is too much! He’s tired Merle. He’s so tired now. They can’t keep expecting him to go on. Not anymore. He deserves to rest. He’s earned that rest.”

Growing up, Mac had rarely seen the gentle side of his father. He had always been a man direct in his expectations of others, and unrelenting in seeing those expectations met. Now though, Merle Walker leaned down next to both his wife and son, and tried to comfort both of them.

“I know Betty, but Mac made a promise, and he’s always been a man to keep a

promise. That's how we raised him. He's his mother's son, and that means he's gonna keep doing what he can until he can't do it no more – and that time hasn't arrived just yet.”

Mac watched as a row of tears dropped from under each of his mother's eyes as she drew close to kiss his forehead before whispering into his right ear.

“You do what you have to do Mackenzie, and we'll be waiting for you when it's done. Don't believe what that monster said. It's not all dark. Not for you. Not for you.”

Mac sat up clutching his chest in the bed

he had fallen asleep on just a few hours earlier inside the Wilfrid Guest House. A painful cough erupted inside of him, causing him to focus on simply being able to take another gasp of oxygen. As had happened back at the cabin earlier, when he removed his hand from his mouth, the palm was covered in blood.

Without speaking, Mac walked quietly from his room and to the hall bath across from Bear's room and down the hall from Reese and Dublin. Cooper had taken the bedroom on the lower floor of the house.

Closing the bathroom door behind him, Mac found himself still struggling for

air, his head growing dizzy from the exertion. Taking a towel from the rack next to the sink, Mac turned on the cold water and soaked the towel before using it to clean off the blood from his hands and face. Finally he was able to take a full breath as he looked into the mirror above the sink and saw the gaunt face of a tired old man staring back at him, followed by the words of August Hess from his dream.

*You're no different than me Mac.
Never were, and you never will be.*

“See about that you bastard.”

Mac then closed his eyes and heard the

voice of his mother.

You do what you have to do Mackenzie, and we'll be waiting for you when it's done. Don't believe what that monster said. It's not all dark. Not for you. Not for you.

Mac opened his eyes and again saw his own face looking back at him. He thought perhaps he didn't look quite so old after all. Not so ready to call it quits. He had just managed to take out five Muslim bandits after all.

I know Betty, but Mac made a promise, and he's always been a man to keep a promise. That's how we raised him.

He's his mother's son, and that means he's gonna keep doing what he can until he can't do it no more – and that time hasn't arrived just yet.

His father was right. Mac had made a promise to help get everyone to the priest. To the weapon that was supposed to help bring down the New United Nations. He was dying, quick now, but not so quick that he didn't have time to follow the mission through to the end. He'd do that, and then...well...whatever.

Before his dream tonight, Mac hadn't thought about his parents for a very long time.

He hadn't realized just how much he missed them...

XXV.

As he had told them after dropping them off at the guest house yesterday, Imran was back at noon to pick up the group and take them to meet the godfather. Imran's mood was, as usual, upbeat and cheerful as he stood on the porch waiting for the others to walk outside to join him.

The temperature, though just above

freezing, was comfortable as the sun shone down on the faux green lawns and plants of the Acorn Drive neighborhood. A man walking his dog paused to waive to Imran, as Brando barked from inside the house as he spotted the Golden Retriever moving down the sidewalk.

“How about we walk? We’re going to Mel’s Diner for lunch. The godfather will meet us there. Just down the road - we passed it last night on our way here.”

Cooper shrugged.

“Fine by me Imran. Whatever the others want to do. I’m gonna have Brando stay

here at the house anyways.”

No-one objected to walking to the diner, though Mac looked as if he had slept very little during the night. Dublin was the first to mention something to him.

“You look tired Mac – sleep ok?”

Mac buttoned up his coat and waived Dublin’s concerns away .

“Fine. Probably got more sleep than you two did.”

Despite his attempts at humor, Mac moved noticeably slower than the others going down the porch steps.

Halfway to Mel's Diner Bear nudged Imran with an elbow.

“So tell me Imran...this place actually owned by a guy named Mel?”

Imran shook his head and chuckled.

“Not a man – a woman! Mel is short for Melanie! She's a great cook! Wonderful woman! All the way from San Francisco.”

Wilfrid's Main Street was bustling with vintage cars driving by, young boys and girls on bikes, and people moving into and out of various small businesses. It

truly was small town America somehow reborn in the vast open fields of northern British Columbia.

Imran pointed to the stoplight that hung across the intersection above them as they waited to cross the street to where Mel's Diner was located.

“The stoplights are all refurbished from a bunch of them that came from St. Louis Missouri. They were used there up until about 1977 when they were replaced by the newer technology. Some guy found them piled up in the old city maintenance yard and sold them for scrap to a builder outside of Montreal. We heard about them and the godfather contacted the guy

and bought a bunch of them up from him. That was...oh...almost seven years ago.”

A black Buick drove by driven by an older white haired woman who honked and then waived at Imran.

“That was Ms. Kaplan. She runs the Wilfrid schools. Was a teacher for thirty years back in Salem Oregon before she came up here to get away from all the New United Nations mandates. Did you have a school in Dominatus, Mac?”

Mac was gazing around at all of the Main Street activity with a hint of a smile, his face reflecting how much the

current scenery was pulling him back to another time in his life so many years ago.

“No, we didn’t have too many kids in Dominatus. Nothing like...like this.”

Imran was making his way across the street as the others in the group followed close behind. The parking in front of Mel’s Diner was nearly full, with many more vintage American cars lined up outside. Imran nodded his head in the direction of a particularly pristine, candy apple red, 1959 Ford Thunderbird.

“Good – the godfather is here already.

Let's go inside."

The unmistakable scent of burgers and fries enveloped all of them as Imran opened the clear glass door of Mel's Diner, the tinkling of a small hanging bell that hung from the top of the door frame announcing their arrival.

A short blonde woman who appeared to be in her late forties or early fifties, dressed in a pink blouse emblazoned with "Mel's Diner" across the back, greeted the group warmly as they walked in.

"Well hello there Imran! Glad to see you again! The godfather told me to be

expecting you today. And these must be your friends everyone was talking about this morning. We heard you had a bit of trouble last night on your way here. Took care of too! Well good for you! My name is Brenda and I'll be your server today!"

When Brenda got a look at Bear towering above the rest, her eyes flew open and she walked up next to him and placed a hand on his left arm.

"Well my goodness aren't you just about the biggest thing I've seen walk in here! Say...have we met before? You sure look familiar!"

Bear looked down at Brenda, his familiar scowl communicating to her he would rather just get on with sitting down and having something to eat rather than stand and talk to her. Brenda proved more than willing to get a response from the big man though.

“C’mon now – what part of the country did you come from? You a southern boy?”

Bear broke down and gave Brenda a one-word response.

“Texas.”

“You don’t say – I’m from Texas! Now

where have I seen you before? My goodness don't you look familiar. I just can't quite figure out why though!"

Imran, likely sensing Bear's smoldering annoyance, intervened to refocus Brenda's attention.

"Uh...the godfather is expecting us."

Realizing she had been making the rest of the group stand and wait as she questioned Bear, Brenda's face grew red and she began to apologize profusely as she turned to show them their seats.

"Oh I am so sorry about that. Just lost my mind there trying to figure out where

I knew your friend from. Follow me now Imran, the godfather is at his regular table right back here.”

Mel's Diner echoed with the sounds of conversations, food being prepared, and happy customers. It appeared to be filled to capacity. Red booths lined the window areas, while stools ran the length of the long bar that extended from one end of the former train car to the other. Behind that bar a small window looked into the kitchen area where a flurry of activity could be seen as all of the orders were being prepared.

At the opposite end from the entrance was the last booth, and in that booth sat a

small, older man with dark, silver streaked hair sipping from a cup of coffee. He wore a simple, dark blue short sleeved cotton shirt, and Levis blue jeans. The hair was combed back from his forehead, and glistened slightly with pomade. His olive skin was relatively smooth except around his eyes, which were kept behind thick, dark framed glasses. The skin was clean shaven except for a thin, neatly trimmed grey mustache. Mac noted that the godfather's hands shook slightly as he raised the coffee cup to his mouth, and on the third finger of his right hand was a gold ring housing a large green emerald.

Imran stood next to the man in the booth

and bowed slightly, extending his left hand toward the others in the group.

“Godfather – these are the ones I told you about. The ones from Alaska.”

The godfather looked up from his coffee cup and looked at Imran and then over to Mac, Reese, Dublin, Cooper, and Bear.

“Please, everyone, have a seat. Brenda, two more seats for the end of the table here. Thank you darling.”

The man’s voice was low, almost a whisper - the voice of a longtime smoker. It was not an unpleasant voice, but had a hint of someone confident that

what they said would be taken seriously – always.

“Please, before we discuss business, let me treat each of you to a Wilfrid burger and fries. You must be hungry. Gonna love it. Top notch all the way. Brenda, can you take care of that please?”

Brenda moved with far more speed back to the kitchen than when she had first welcomed them into the diner.

Taking a slow sip from his coffee, the godfather peeked across the table at Reese and stared at him for several seconds.

“You’re the radio guy, right? Did the program from Dominatus? When the drones were attacking, right? Well listened to your talk. Great stuff. Really...what’s the word? Inspirational!”

Reese nodded, fascinated by the intensity of the older man’s eyes.

“Yes, that was me. The others here, Mac, Bear, and Dublin, they were there as well. They lived there in Dominatus – I was just...just visiting.”

The godfather put his coffee down and pointed to Mac, Bear and Dublin, and then lastly, Cooper Wyse.

“So if those three were with you at Dominatus, who’s this?”

Imran began to remind the godfather of who Cooper was, but a quick look from the founder of Fort Wilfrid warned Imran he was to remain quiet.

Reese continued with his own explanation.

“This is Cooper Wyse. He’s an associate of Imran’s. He helped to get us here to Wilfrid.”

The godfather’s dark eyes went from Reese to Cooper, where they remained

as he addressed the rancher.

“Ah yes, the Irish cowboy, right? From Juneau. Loves horses, hay, open fields, all that shit. We’ve done a fair amount of business haven’t we Cooper? You and Imran, and myself. Don’t recall meeting you in person though, and yet, Imran has told me you’ve been to Wilfrid before, is that right?”

Cooper nodded but said nothing.

“So why would you travel all the way here and not want to meet me? Ain’t I... interesting enough for you?”

Cooper’s eyes met the godfather’s stare,

remaining there while he responded.

“Didn’t know I was required to pay tribute...sir. I was just stopping to rest up before heading back home again. Haven’t been back for a while since then.”

The godfather’s head lowered slightly as he continued to stare at Cooper Wyse.

“Did you find Wilfrid hospitable enough while you rested up?”

Cooper gave a small smile and shrugged.

“Sure. Interesting place you have here.”

The godfather's eyes flashed momentarily as he leaned forward in the booth toward Cooper Wyse.

“Interesting? What’s that supposed to mean Mr. Wyse? Interesting. I find that to be a rather...interesting choice of word.”

Cooper clasped both of his hands in front of him and placed them on the table.

“Means what it says. Interesting. Different. Like a living, breathing, museum of sorts. I’m a man who can appreciate that kind of thing. Some folks

have described me with similar words. From a different time. Born too late...”

The godfather took another sip of his coffee as his eyes looked over at Mac.

“And you – you’re the one who fought that special operations officer up there in Dominatus? Kicked the shit out of him? I was also told you shot dead five bandits last night all by yourself. Is that right? You’re even older than me!”

Mac took a slow, measured breath.

“Sounds about right.”

“And do you like it here Mr. Walker?”

Mac leaned back in the booth and looked through the window to the retro-world outside.

“Yeah – I do. A lot. Feels like, feels like home. How home used to feel. Like America before it all went to shit.”

The godfather smiled for the first time since the meeting had begun, though that smile quickly disappeared.

“Thank you Mr. Walker. I appreciate the compliment. Nice to know somebody who appreciates giving a kind word from time to time. And thank you for taking out those Muslim animals last

night. I hate those assholes. Absolutely hate them with every part of me. Call me racist but I do. Got no use for them, none at all. Hate the radical jihadist fucks who have torn apart the world, and I hate all of the self proclaimed moderates who sat silently and let them do it. Wilfrid is open to just about anyone who wants to visit, do business, or even call this place their home - but not them. Not ever. Not as long as I live and breathe, there will be no Muslims in Wilfrid.”

“Oh my god! You were on the Cowboys! You played in the NFL! That’s where I’ve seen you!”

Brenda had returned with the food, and was staring down at Bear, clearly awe struck to be serving a former member of the Dallas Cowboys. Bear looked up uncomfortably as he reached for one of the plates.

“Yeah, I did. A long time ago.”

Brenda continued to place the plates of hamburgers and fries in front of the others but never stopped looking at Bear as she did so.

“My whole family just loved watching the Cowboys every Sunday. My goodness I can’t believe I have you sitting here right in front me! What a

strange thing life can be! Now I hope you all are going to the godfather's tonight. Imran, you gonna show these nice people a good time? How we let out hair down and have some fun?"

The godfather looked up at Brenda and smiled.

"Thank you Brenda. You can go now."

Brenda looked like she wanted to continue staring at Bear, but glanced down at the godfather and walked away, though she did manage to look back a few times as she did so.

The godfather stood up while motioning

for everyone else to remain seated.

“Please, stay. Finish your lunch, my treat. We’ll talk again tonight. In the meantime, relax, and enjoy the hospitality of Wilfrid. Imran, Brenda is right. I want you to bring everyone by my place tonight at around, say, eight o’clock. Ok?”

Imran nodded.

“Good – see you all then.”

The godfather walked toward the diner’s exit, stopping to shake hands with people as he did so. Right before he left to go outside, he hugged a tall, red

haired woman and pointed back toward the group. As soon as the godfather left the diner, the woman immediately made her way toward Imran and the others.

“Hello Imran. I was told to make sure everyone had the very best meal possible today. Everyone – my name is Mel. This is my diner. Welcome to Wilfrid. Could I interest any of you in one of my home made pies? Apple, Cherry, Rhubarb? I could put a little scoop of vanilla on the side if you like.

Bear raised his hand.

“Yeah – sounds good.”

Mel looked at Bear and smiled.

“Well, which one do you want?”

Bear nodded back.

“All of them.”

Brenda yelled out from across the diner.

“He used to play for the Cowboys Mel! Serve him up the good stuff! We don’t get to see a big old hunk of man like this every day! He can tackle me anytime!”

Everyone but Bear laughed at Brenda’s enthusiasm.

Cooper Wyse looked at Bear and then nodded in Brenda's direction.

“Looks like you got yourself a stalker there, Bear. She's downright smitten.”

Bear didn't bother to look up, but chose to concentrate fully on the food in front of him, though his left hand did manage to extend a large middle finger at Cooper.

Dublin tapped the top of Imran's right hand to get his attention.

“So Imran, what is this place we're supposed to be meeting the godfather tonight?”

Imran, who had almost finished his meal, took a drink of water and then wiped his face with napkin before answering.

“It’s a bar called “Godfather’s”. We do Karaoke there! The godfather loves to listen to people sing, loves to see people relaxing and having fun. For him to invite you there tonight is a good sign he likes you and is considering helping you to get to Manitoba.”

Bear looked up from the last of his food just long enough to growl his disagreement of Imran’s description of the godfather.

“He just sounded more like an asshole to me. Sitting there interrogating us. What the hell was that all about?”

A look of panic washed over Imran's face as he glanced around to see who might have heard Bear's remarks.

“Hush! Don't speak about the godfather like that! Show some respect! Yes, he was asking questions but that is because he feels it is his duty to make certain you are who you say you are. That is all. You had your Old Man in Dominatus, right? Well here in Wilfrid, we have our godfather.”

Dublin nudged an elbow into Mac's

side.

“Say Mac, when’s the last time you played a guitar for anyone?”

Mac glanced over at Dublin and shook his head slowly at her.

“No. Don’t even think about it.”

Dublin persisted.

“C’mon Mac, you used to play for us all the time in Dominatus. We’re going to be sitting there in a bar tonight. Maybe Imran can round up a guitar for you?”

Imran nodded his head enthusiastically.

“Yes! We have guitars at the godfather’s! You can play Mac?”

Mac shook his head but Dublin ignored him.

“Yes, he can play wonderfully. And he can sing too. Mr. Mac Walker is a man of many talents.”

Mac continued to shake his head, but he was smiling as he did so.

“Ok, maybe. I’m not saying yes – I’m saying maybe.”

Imran’s hand slapped down on top of the

table.

“Then it is settled! Mac Walker is to sing tonight for the people of Wilfrid!”

Brenda’s voice shouted out from across the diner again.

“And I got first dibs on dancing with the big guy!”

Bear put his hands over his face.

“Oh Lord...”

XXVI.

Shortly before eight o'clock that evening, Imran, arrived at the Wilfrid Guest House to pick up the group and take them to *Godfather's*, the nightclub owned by its namesake. Cooper Wyse was again forced to leave Brando behind at the house, something he clearly didn't want to do, but a requirement Brando seemed more than happy to comply with as he stretched out once again in front of the fireplace.

Dublin mentioned that they weren't exactly dressed for a night on the town, to which Imran waived away the suggestion with his near perpetual smile.

“It’s very casual there. No worries. We will first go up to the second floor above the club. That is the godfather’s personal residence. He wishes to speak to you in more detail about your journey, and what he might be willing to do to help.”

Cooper, still agitated at leaving his beloved Doberman behind, pointed a finger into Imran’s chest.

“Cut the shit Imran. You know who we need to help us. You also likely already know if the godfather will allow it or no. So what’s it going to be?”

Imran took a step back from Cooper and

shook his head.

“I don’t know that Cooper. I would tell you if I did.”

Cooper persisted.

“Have you brought it up to him? Our idea on how we can get across all that land between here and there as quickly and safely as possible?”

Imran raised both of his hands in front of him.

“Yes, I have. The godfather’s response was tough to read - very tough. It usually is. But he didn’t say no, so that’s

good news.”

It was Mac’s turn to interject, as he tapped Cooper’s shoulder.

“What plan do you seem to have already hatched Cooper – and why weren’t we in the loop on it?”

Cooper glanced at Mac and then stared back at Imran.

“No real plan yet Mac. Just...hoping something works out. I was counting on Imran to get it done for us, but it looks like that hasn’t happened just yet. Guess we’ll have to cross that bridge at this little meeting we’re on our way to.”

Reese wanted to know what Cooper was talking about as well.

“What plan Cooper? Let us know so we aren’t caught flat footed.”

“Cooper Wyse placed both of his hands into the back pockets of his jeans and rocked back on his boots slightly before answering Reese and Mac’s questions.

“There’s a Russian guy who runs this train. Old beat up mess of metal. Coal powered. A relic from a hundred and fifty years back that he fixed up. He stays about ten miles south of here. There’s a set of tracks that was put in

place during a silver rush they had up this way a long time ago. Well, this Russian got that train running, spent months repairing all those miles of tracks, and he's been the biggest goods transporter from here to Vancouver and miles and miles to the East as well. That sound about right Imran?"

Imran nodded.

"Yes! He is under the protection of the godfather, and the Vancouver Muslim warlord, Borzoo. Transports goods for everyone willing to pay – and everyone does."

Bear scowled at the mention of Borzoo.

“Wait, this Russian, he takes money from both the godfather and some Muslim warlord too? And the godfather is ok with that? I thought he said he hated all Muslims? Why is he helping finance an operation that is helping his enemies?”

Cooper turned to Bear.

“Around here, the Black Market rules everything. And to have that market, you need a way to get goods from one place to the other. The Russian provides that service to whoever pays him. He doesn't discriminate between good or bad, it's all the same to him as long as they pay. People like the godfather, or

this Borzoo fella...they need the Russian. They need those goods.”

Dublin looked at Imran and then Cooper.

“And so you two thought that this Russian would use his train to transport us to Manitoba? Is that it?”

Cooper nodded.

“Yeah. Otherwise, it’s gonna be one long, tough slog and I think if we did manage to get there, it might be too late. The Texas Resistance can’t hold out much longer down there. Whatever that weapon is in Manitoba, I figure we need to get to it fast.”

Mac was looking at Cooper with an intensity not seen since they arrived at Fort Wilfrid.

“Can he be trusted? This Russian?”

Cooper nodded toward Imran, who in turn, answered Mac.

“Yes. If he agrees to something, he always delivers. Always.”

“How much?”

Reese’s question was left without a response from either Imran or Cooper, so he repeated it.

“How much to transport all of us on this train of his? What’s the cost? You say he’ll deliver as long as he’s paid. So how much?”

Imran shook his head slightly, looking down at his feet.

“That...that I don’t know. Tonight we will discuss the plan, the cost, those things we will talk about with the godfather.”

Now it was Dublin’s turn to interject.

“So it seems like we are going to have to pay the godfather just to have the chance

to talk with this Russian, and then we might have to pay the Russian too. Is that right?”

Imran looked from Cooper Wyse back to Dublin.

“Perhaps. We will have to see how the negotiations go.”

Mac was not pleased with Imran’s use of the word negotiations in relation to their mission to defeat the New United Nations.

“We ain’t negotiable Imran. This isn’t some business transaction – we’re talking about a war going on and tens of

thousands of people who are fighting for their lives trying to push back against the New United Nations.”

Cooper came to Imran’s aid.

“Imran knows that Mac. We have to deal with the people and the situation that’s available to us. That means negotiating with the godfather and this Russian. We’re not getting around that, ok? It is what it is. So let’s just make our way to the godfather, and see what can be done about getting us to Manitoba.”

Mac turned to Reese and Dublin, who both nodded. Bear appeared on the

verge of throttling Imran with his hands, though said nothing. Finally Mac agreed.

“Ok – let’s go.”

In the driveway of the Wilfrid Guest House was parked a sea green 1959 Cadillac Eldorado. Mac’s demeanor changed almost instantly as he walked up to the vehicle and then looked back at Imran.

“This yours?”

Imran’s smile returned as he pointed to what was clearly a prized possession.

“Yes! 1959 Cadillac! All mine!”

Cooper Wyse issued a slow, low whistle as he ran his hand along the tall back fin that rose from the car's rear panel.

“Didn’t know you had this Imran. She’s beautiful.”

Bear appeared less than impressed.

“We supposed to all fit in that thing? There’s six of us.”

Imran opened the driver’s door and pushed the seat forward to allow access to the back seat.

“Yes – plenty of room. Three in back. Three in front.”

Dublin, Reese, and Cooper settled into the backseat, and as promised, found it more than comfortable. Bear and Mac joined Imran in the front seat, and even Bear’s massive shoulders were not too terribly cramped having to share the space with the two other men.

As Imran started up the engine, Mac couldn’t help but smile at the sound of the now long ago Detroit made V-8 engine. Before backing out of the driveway, Imran turned on the car’s radio and smiled again as the sounds of Dean Martin singing *Volare* issued from

the small in-dash speakers.

“We have our own radio station in Wilfrid! Plays lots of Dean Martin. The godfather loves Dean Martin.”

Travelling down the well paved roads of Wilfrid, Imran pointed out other notable parts of his newly adopted hometown. There was a pizza parlor that delivered, a two story red brick building that was designated City Hall where in the back were parked various 1950's era maintenance vehicles, and in the center of the town was a two acre park with benches, cobble stone walking paths, and a small water fountain.

As Imran drove further from the center of town, the residential homes were replaced by more industrial looking buildings. A place that created clothing, another that repaired vehicles, and yet another that Imran indicated held the community's stored food reserves.

It was adjacent to that building that Imran parked in front of another, smaller two story structure with a large neon sign on the outside that read "Godfather's". A large parking lot was parallel to the building's entrance, where some ten classic American cars were parked.

Imran pulled his car alongside the same

red 1959 Thunderbird he had indicated earlier was the godfather's personal vehicle. Before getting out, he looked over to Mac.

“No weapons are allowed inside. You can leave them in the locked trunk of the car. They'll be secure there.”

Bear was about to protest from the backseat but Mac held up his hand and nodded.

“Fine. We're putting our trust in you Imran. I hope you don't disappoint.”

The entrance to the nightclub was a simple red door that opened to a small,

well lit reception room where a tall, thin, forty-something man in a dark grey pinstriped suit stood just to the side of yet another red door. On that door was a small white sign that read, “You’re a guest – act accordingly”.

The man next to the door nodded at Imran as the group walked into the reception room.

“Hello Imran. I take it you informed your guests of the no weapons policy?”

Imran shook the man’s hand and nodded.

“Yes, I personally vouch for my guests Taylor. We have a meeting with the

godfather upstairs.”

The man, whose name the others now knew to be Taylor, offered Imran a brief smile as he opened the door into the club.

“Welcome to Godfather’s everyone – enjoy the evening.”

As he walked through the second red door, Mac noted the metal detector that was hidden within the door frame – clearly the godfather wanted this place to be as secure as possible.

The main area of the club was a large, dimly lit room with a long, dark oak bar

at the opposite end of the entrance, and several small round tables positioned in the middle of the floor. At the north end of the room was a dance floor area and just above that, a small stage where a single microphone was placed atop a black metallic mic stand.

There were no more than twelve or so people seated at various tables, with another few seated at the bar. All were talking quietly as the sound of Dean Martin singing of another kick in the head was heard in the background.

A short, rotund man with a friendly, smiling face walked up to Imran and hugged him. Like Taylor in the reception

room, this man too was dressed in a dark grey pinstriped suit.

“Welcome back Imran! Glad you’ve made it home safely. I see you brought your friends with you. Hello everyone, name’s Marcini. I’m the manager here. Very glad to meet all of you.”

Marcini extended a thick, short fingered right hand to each one of the group and greeted them enthusiastically. He stopped briefly in front of Dublin and offered her an even warmer smile.

“Always nice to see such a beautiful woman join us here at the club.”

Dublin flashed a thin smile back to Marcini, but said nothing.

“Ok folks, I know you have an appointment with the godfather, so please follow me this way.”

Imran and the others walked directly behind Marcini as he made his way to a narrow stairway located just to the right of the bar area. Mac again noted the security measures taken – one camera was located in the ceiling at the bottom of the stairs, and another also in the ceiling at the very top of the stairs and in front of yet another red door. The former Navy SEAL watched as Marcini’s eyes glanced to the first

camera as he passed underneath it.

The door at the top of the stairs opened just before Marcini reached it. Inside was a twelve by twelve sitting room that contained a dark leather couch and two matching chairs positioned around a small black glass coffee table. The same Dean Martin song was softly playing inside this room as downstairs in the main club area.

Marcini motioned for the others to have a seat before turning to knock on a large door that was covered in the same dark leather material as the couch and chairs.

“Please have a seat and I will be back to

get you.”

Marcini disappeared behind the door as it closed behind him, followed by the faint click of a locking mechanism.

Bear, who remained standing, growled his disapproval.

“We are locked in here unarmed, waiting on this asshole for what? To get his goddamn blessing? His permission? What the hell is all of this shit?”

Mac turned to Bear and held his right pointer finger up to his lips, communicating he needed to be quiet. His eyes glanced upward toward one of

the ceiling corners of the small room where yet another camera was placed.

Imran simply shook his head at Bear's most recent words while Cooper Wyse settled into one of the large leather chairs and tilted his head back with a small smile.

“Relax Bear...if they wanted to harm us they had plenty of opportunity to do it already. This is all just...just part of the program here.”

Bear stepped toward the seated Cooper and jabbed a finger into the rancher's chest.

“I don’t like being messed with – and right now, I feel like I’m being messed with. You call it a program? I call it a bunch of idiots pretending they’re living in a world that doesn’t exist anymore. And I don’t care if they hear every word of what I’m saying.”

Cooper closed his eyes, the smile remaining on his face.

“That’s fine Bear...you’re welcome to your opinion. I’d just ask a little favor of you though.”

Bear glanced down at Cooper, who appeared on the verge of falling asleep.

“Yeah – what?”

As Cooper Wyse’s eyes opened and the smile washed away, he gave Bear a hard look that let it be known he had no fear of the larger man’s size and strength.

“Don’t ever touch me like that again Bear. I’ve seen how strong you are... but I’ve broken far stronger animals than you. Now I just as soon keep things respectful between us...but you try something like that again, and me and you...well...it won’t do either one of us any good. You understanding me?”

Before Bear could respond, the door opened and Marcini re-appeared,

motioning for the others to follow him.

“The godfather is ready to see you.”

XXVII.

The group was ushered into a large twenty by twenty lounge area where, on the opposite end of the room from the entrance door, sat the godfather behind a large, ornate, wood carved desk. Upon seeing them enter the room, the godfather rose from his leather bound chair and smiled warmly, his right hand extended.

Unlike the other staff of the club, the

godfather was dressed in an immaculate dark blue pinstriped suit, with a deep burgundy tie that slashed downward from the front of his cream colored dress shirt. His feet were housed in rich dark leathered shoes that were shined to a mirror like finish.

“Hello again my friends, and welcome to my home!”

In addition to Marcini, two other men dressed identically as him, were in the lounge. One was seated atop a bar stool next to a min-replica of the full sized bar downstairs, and the other stood in the far left corner, saying nothing as he watched the group enter the room. The man

seated was of average height, balding, with a large bushy mustache that hid his upper lip. He was at least fifty years of age, possibly as old as sixty.

The other man standing in the corner was short and lean, very similar in build to the godfather. His smooth shaven face and thick dark hair suggested an age of perhaps thirty.

The godfather's handshake was brief and weak, almost limp. Bear had to fight off the urge to squeeze the small man's hands into a pulp inside his own.

"Please everyone, have a seat here and here."

The lounge area had similar matching leather couch and chairs as was placed in the sitting room, though these were larger. Mac hesitated to sit, causing the rest of the group to remain standing as well.

The godfather, returning to his own seat behind his desk, looked at Mac and the others still standing and pointed again to the couch and chairs.

“Sit down.”

Mac made certain to get brief eye contact with the man standing in the corner of the room before nodding to the

others in the group and sitting down in the chair nearest to the godfather's desk.

Folding his hands in front of him, the godfather again smiled as he leaned forward slightly in his chair.

“Can I offer you a drink? A glass of wine? Bourbon? Whatever you want – we got it. And if we don't have it... we'll go out and get it. That's what we do.”

Mac remained silent, signaling for the others to do the same.

Imran, sensing the awkward pause, attempted to begin the discussion of the

group's hopes of securing safe passage to Manitoba on the Russian's train.

“Godfather, my friends from Alaska are very much hoping to obtain uh... transport of themselves to Manitoba on the train. They would like your help in setting up that transport.”

Leaning back in his chair, the godfather glanced over at the man seated at the bar, and then nodded toward Mancini who stood just to the right of Mac.

“Marcini, our guests have...refused my offer of drink. Imran should know better but the others...I'll forgive the insult. For now. Bring in a bottle of the

Seghesio – the 2008. And some glasses Mancini – don't forget the glasses.”

As Marcini left the room, the godfather looked back at the group seated in front of him.

“Red wine, good for the heart. Good for the soul. You know that, right?”

Dublin decided to find common ground with the godfather as a means of improving their chances of securing the use of the train for passage to Manitoba.

“Yes, my grandfather loved wine. His family owned a vineyard in France for some time. He had quite a collection.

Even in Dominatus, he had some wonderful examples.”

The godfather’s dark, flinty eyes settled fully on Dublin, remaining there until she looked away.

“That’s right...you’re Dublin Meyer. Grandchild of Alexander Meyer. Your grandfather was a very rich man. Doubt my own wine collection can stack up to his Ms. Meyer. I’m not the child of vineyard owning parents you see. Just a kid from Steubenville Ohio, home of Dean Martin, God rest his smooth singing, wine drinkin’ soul!”

Dublin looked back at the godfather,

whose unsmiling eyes remained locked on her.

“I’m sure your wine will be just fine. And thank you for offering it to us.”

The godfather’s smile returned as his hands clapped lightly together several times.

“And thank you for showing some good manners Ms. Meyer. Normally when I offer people something, they at least thank me for the privilege. It took you a while to get there, but get there you did.”

It wasn’t Bear who spoke out against the godfather’s words, but Reese, who had

been intently watching the godfather staring at Dublin for the last few minutes.

“We have done nothing but offer up good manners, sir. We were brought here as guests. And if you don’t mind, I’d like you stop staring at Dublin like that, because it’s really starting to piss me off.”

The godfather’s eyes remained on Dublin as he spoke to the man seated on the bar stool, his voice rising in volume with each word.

“Do you hear that Johnny? I’m being told what to do in my own house. And

these are the same people who then want me to trouble myself with getting them the use of my fucking train!”

Cooper Wyse, who had sat silently on the right corner of the couch, shook his head.”

“That’s not your train — it’s the Russian’s train. Everyone knows that. He found it. He repaired it. He’s the only one who knows how to run it. Without him, your little oasis of lost Americana dries up and blows away. That’s if the Muslims don’t come in and cut your throats first.”

The eyes of the man standing in the

corner widened as he looked back at Cooper with clear malice, taking a step toward the seated rancher. The godfather held up a hand, signaling for the man to remain where he was.

“That’s my son, Ricky. He’s not used to hearing people speak to me that way Mr. Wyse. You think you could handle my son being upset with you?”

Cooper glanced over at the godfather’s son, whose eyes remained livid with rage, and then looked back at the godfather.

“I like my chances.”

Marcini returned to the room carrying a wine bottle and some glasses, which he laid out on the mini bar's table.

“Open it up and let it breathe Marcini. Don't pour it for another...ten minutes.

“Yes godfather.”

The godfather looked back at Imran and spread his hands outward.

“So what now, Imran? Is this it? You want me to help you convince the Russian to take you halfway across Canada to Manitoba? And for what? So you can see some French priest who says he has a weapon that can harm the

New United Nations? Is that good business? I lose all that time with no train deliveries to or from Wilfrid. That make sense to you?”

Imran offered a wide smile of understanding toward the godfather’s concerns.

“Yes, of course you should be compensated godfather. I could offer you several deliveries for free perhaps? To make up for the loss of use of the train?”

The godfather shook his head slowly.

“You don’t deliver near enough in that

truck of yours to equal the use of the train Imran.”

“How about because it’s the right fucking thing to do?”

Mac’s statement hung in the air, as the godfather again folded his hands in front of him and placed them on top of his desk.

“Mr. Walker, perhaps you were accustomed to talking that way in Dominatus, but here, in MY HOUSE, you will afford me the respect and courtesy I deserve.”

Mac rose from his chair and looked

down at the godfather.

“If I gave you the respect you deserved, you’d be a mess of a stain on the wall by now. We’re fighting to free people you dumb little phony ass prick. We ain’t pretending out there in the real world. We’re trying to survive. You understand? You think you’re safe playing 1950’s? They’ll come for you, just like they came for us. Just like they come for everybody, eventually. You heard the same thing I have – Muslims are planning on running all over this place on their way into Alaska. I’m willing to bet the drones won’t be far behind. If you really care about saving this place...about the people you say

you're protecting – you'll help us out. And if you won't help us out, then fuck you. We'll do it ourselves. Someway, somehow, we'll manage. We always do.”

It was the godfather's turn to rise from his chair, motioning for his son Ricky to move toward Mac.

“You're an old man, Mr. Walker. Older than me. Old enough that your tough guy mentality doesn't fit into an old man's body. That doesn't excuse bad manners though, and frankly, when you come in here and talk to me like that, you leave me no choice but to make an example of you. As much as I don't wish to be a

poor host, I can't have people believing I would allow such behavior to go unpunished."

Ricky held a gun now pointed inches from Mac's head.

Imran attempted to step between Mac and the godfather's son.

"No! Godfather, please, this is not necessary! These are good people. They are attempting to do something brave and noble! Please, don't do this!"

The godfather waived away Imran's concerns.

“I’m not gonna kill him Imran – just teach him some manners. You need to keep quiet or I might decide you need the same lesson.”

Cooper Wyse, who remained seated, placed his hands behind his head while leaning back in the chair.

“How about a wager? I hear you’re a betting man. That right?”

The godfather glanced at his son, and then looked down at Cooper.

“I do enjoy a good bet Mr. Wyse. Yes indeed. What are you proposing?”

Cooper nodded at Mac.

“You say Mac there, he’s an old man, right? How about you put up your toughest guy against Mac? Hand to hand. One old man against whoever you got. You can let everyone in the bar watch. Give them a free show. It’ll be good for business. Have ‘em go at it on the dance floor. If Mac loses, well... you’ve just taught him that lesson. Now if Mac wins though...you owe us that train ride.”

The godfather looked genuinely interested in what Cooper offered. He signaled for his son to put his gun down and step back from Mac.

“You open to what your friend here is proposing, Mr. Walker?”

Mac’s eyes flashed back at the godfather as he nodded.

“Sure – as long as you’re a man of your word. I win, we get that train ride.”

The godfather waived a finger back at Mac.

“If you win, and that is a very unlikely if...I will consider that train ride, which is a far better place to negotiate from than you are currently. Marcini, prepare the area for the fight. Let Santos

know he's up.”

Imran looked at the godfather with horror.

“Not Santos...please godfather. That's not fair!”

The godfather smiled back at Imran, pointing over to Cooper as he did so.

“I didn't make the suggestion Imran – he did. Mr .Walker has agreed to the terms. Now if you don't mind, I suggest we have some of that wine Marcini so kindly opened for us.”

The godfather personally poured the

wine into several glasses and placed them in front of his guests. Mac was the only one to pick up a glass, emptying it with one gulp.

“Not bad. I’ll take another.”

The godfather’s eyebrows raised, as his head cocked to the right slightly.

“You sure you want to be doing that Mr. Walker? A clear head may be your only chance of victory.”

Mac snorted back at the godfather.

“Shit - I may be old, but I’ve handled far tougher than anything or anyone you have

in this place.”

The godfather gave Mac a second glass.

“Oh, I have been told you were a tough man once Mr. Walker, but it would appear that time came and went long ago. Now you’re like me, a shadow of what you once were, whose fighting is better left to others.”

Mac finished off his second glass of wine.

“Another.”

Bear touched Mac’s shoulder, concerned for his friend’s safety.

“Hey Mac, maybe you want to lay off the drinks, and let me stand in for you.”

The godfather shook his head at Bear while placing another glass of wine in Mac’s hand.

“That’s not the deal we struck. Mac is to be the one who takes on my man. The odds favor me, which is why I took the bet. Now if everyone could make their way downstairs, we’ll prepare for the show!”

Mac and the others were escorted to the main room of the nightclub, which now held many more people than when they

had arrived earlier. Marcini instructed them to sit around a table and wait for his return.

Mac appeared unconcerned at the challenge that awaited him. Imran on the other hand, was clearly upset.

“This is a very bad idea. Santos is a monster! He’s almost as big as Bear, and he’s younger! Maybe even stronger! I’ve seen him throw people out of here three at a time!”

Mac looked over at Imran and told him to shut up, which in turn caused Bear to start laughing.

“This is just like that time in Dominatus Mac! You and August Hess.”

Mac shook his head.

“Not quite – I felt a whole lot younger then.”

The godfather had stepped to the small stage to address the hundred or so people who were packed inside the night club.

“Ladies and gentleman I am so happy to be able to introduce you to some friends of ours from across the ice fields of Alaska. And not just any Alaskans mind you – some of the actual survivors of

Dominatus! In fact, the gentleman who gave the radio address we all listened to as the drones were dropping bombs on top of them, is among the group! Please, Mr. Reese Neeson, could you stand up and give a wave to the audience? Go ahead, stand up Mr. Neeson.”

Reese stood up slowly while briefly waving at the people around him, many of whom were clapping for him.

“Thank you Reese – wonderful to have you here with us all tonight. Now in addition to Mr. Neeson, we also have the gentleman who provided security for Dominatus for many-many years. His name is Mr. Mac Walker and I would

like everyone to give him a round of applause as well.”

Mac stood up and nodded, and then sat back down.

“Now folks, we have a very special treat for you tonight. Mr. Walker is something of a legend in Alaska, known for being among the toughest men you’ll find in that part of the world. So tough in fact, he is confident he can handle our own toughest in Wilfrid, even at Mr. Walker’s advanced age, which I’ll remind him, and all you – is even older than yours truly! That’s right ladies and gentlemen – that old man who just stood up, has made a personal wager with me

that he can best our own Santos in hand to hand combat! Unbelievable! I know – unbelievable!”

People were turning to look back at Mac, some pointing, shaking their heads, and laughing.

Bear glared back at them, livid.

“What a bunch of assholes.”

The godfather was pointing to the left of the stage at someone.

“Hello there Santos! Are you ready to introduce yourself to Mr. Walker sitting over there?”

Santos lived up to the hype the godfather had delivered. Standing nearly as tall as Bear, though perhaps slightly leaner, he looked every bit the warrior. Not quite yet thirty years old, his dark hair was cut short in the crew cut style of the godfather's beloved 1950's. Deep set dark eyes peered out from a prominent brow, while his mouth was framed in a square jaw that looked to be chiseled from stone. His thick neck sat atop very wide, muscular shoulders that appeared ready to burst from his black, v-neck t-shirt.

Mac looked over at the very large and soon-to-be opponent and laughed,

causing Imran to turn around and stare at Mac in amazed and increasingly concerned confusion.

“How can you be laughing when you are supposed to be facing THAT?”

Mac waived away the threat that was Santos.

“Anyone who tries that hard to look tough – isn’t. I’ve run across tons of guys like that Imran. Right now it’s more a matter of me deciding how bad I should hurt him.”

Imran’s concern persisted.

“You are not that person anymore! Mac...I’m sorry to have to remind you – you’re an old man!”

Mac’s hand darted out toward Imran and grasped him by the throat with just his thumb and two other fingers as he slowly stood up from his chair. Imran struggled for breath as Mac’s grip tightened.

“Tired of people reminding me of what I already know. You just sit here and wait for me to get back Imran. This won’t take long.”

Mac walked toward the stage, his eyes never leaving those of Santos, who was glaring back at the older man who he had

just been ordered to fight.

Standing near the godfather, Mac motioned to the microphone, indicating he wanted to speak a few words before beginning the wager.

The godfather smiled and passed the microphone to Mac.

“Hello everyone. I just wanted to ask something before I get started. Now I can hurt this big guy over here a little bit, or a lot. Could kill him too, but I’d rather not do that. So I just want to make sure I meet the obligations of the bet I have with the...godfather over here. I hurt him enough that he don’t want to

fight on, and the conditions of our little bet are met, right?”

Though the godfather's mouth was smiling, his eyes held Mac's gaze for a moment, and there was no smile to be found within them.

“That is fine Mr. Walker – if you truly believe yourself capable, which of course is absurd. Ok then ladies and gentlemen, if you would please make sure to clear out an area around the dance floor. That's it, move the tables back. We don't want anyone getting hurt – well, except for Mr. Walker of course. Just a little hurt though Mac, I promise.”

Santos stepped down onto the dance floor area, looming over Mac who stood with both arms relaxed at his side. Despite Mac's outward disinterest, his mind was noting every movement his opponent had just made. The dominant foot he used to step down from the stage, which foot he placed forward, the tilt of the shoulders, where his eyes looked. The big man, though confident, had just a touch of uncertainty, and Mac knew then he faced an individual who had very little actual fighting experience – a common trait in men big enough to scare away potential trouble without ever having to prove themselves capable.

This was going to be even easier than he thought. Mac's biggest concern was not killing Santos. He didn't even know the man, who was clearly just following the orders of the godfather.

“Ok everybody, it's hand to hand combat! Our Santos against the great defender of Dominatus – the legendary Mac Walker! Gentlemen, are you ready?”

Santos nodded while Mac merely smiled up at him as he did so.

Mac waited for the big man to move first, which Santos did with a somewhat awkward lunge at him where his right

fist flew over Mac's ducking head. Mac stepped slightly to his right and brought his left elbow up into Santos's chin. The momentum of both the big man's lunging move and Mac's arm caused Santos's head to snap back for a brief moment. That moment was all Mac needed to bring his right thumb and jab it almost too fast for the eye to see into Santos's throat. Mac held back when delivering the blow, not wanting to seriously harm the other man. The audience gasped at how quickly and efficiently Mac had injured his much larger opponent.

The effect on Santos was immediate as both of his hands covered the just struck part of his throat as he gasped for

breath. Mac stepped away from him and looked to the godfather, indicating the fight should be over. The godfather in turn waited to see if Santos would recover enough to continue.

Santos did, and for the first time, Mac's confidence waivered.

The big man lunged again at Mac, who attempted to sidestep Santos, but this time proved just a bit too slow in reacting. Santos managed to hit Mac a glancing blow with his shoulder, sending the seventy five year old backward as he struggled to remain on his feet. Santos then swung his huge right fist directly toward the side of Mac's head.

At this point Mac realized the fight must end very soon or the cancer in his lungs and body was going to incapacitate him long before Santos could. Already each breath was becoming more difficult and painful. Oddly though, for as poorly as Mac felt, his mind remained calm as it was trained to do all those years ago during his time both in the military and as a hired gun for the government. Thousands and thousands of hours of training and experience had left Mac's mind as capable as ever – even as his body grew weak.

Santos's punch flew past Mac's face, just as another left hook was attempted.

This one too flew over Mac's head as he ducked under the arms of his opponent only to re-emerge back up directly in front of Santos with no space between their bodies. The move, as Mac had predicted in his mind, startled Santos just enough to allow Mac to snap his neck back and then forward again, causing the top of his forehead to pound into the bridge of Santos's nose with a satisfying crunch.

His nose broken, and blood already flowing over his mouth and chin, Santos again fell back, though this time falling to his left knee as he attempted to wipe the blood from the front of his face with a forearm.

For the second time, Mac Walker looked to the godfather for the fight to end, his chest heaving with the exertion, but satisfied in how easily he had defeated a far younger and more powerful man. It was, minus the cancer and his impending death, just like old times.

The godfather nodded to Mac and waived Marcini over to assist Santos, who was holding his head back and holding his nose in an attempt to stop the bleeding.

“How about a big round of applause for our combatants! Let them know how well they did. Especially YOU Mr.

Walker – especially you!”

The nightclub erupted in applause for Mac, as several people offered to buy him his drinks for the remainder of the evening. Mac ignored their attention though, turning instead to the godfather.

“So we have a deal? We get use of that train?”

The godfather smiled down at Mac from the stage and extended his left hand toward a long table to his left.

“Please Mr. Walker, let us enjoy the evening. Some food, some drink, and yes, perhaps a little business. I am very

impressed with you Mac. Very-very impressed! You give hope for an old man like me you know. Perhaps there's life yet left in this world for ghosts such as ourselves. Bring your friends to my table and let's try and enjoy our company this evening. You've proven yourself worthy of my attention – and for that I am truly grateful Mr. Walker. Truly grateful! We haven't had this much entertainment around here in quite some time!”

Mac was quickly becoming convinced the godfather had lost his mind. A madman trapped in an odd world of nostalgia where he had taken on the persona of a mafia boss from some long

ago movie. The streets, the cars, the fake grass and trees...it all pointed to some form of willful communal dementia by everyone living in Wilfrid – Imran included. In Dominatus they lived in a real world, left alone to do as they pleased. Here, in Wilfrid, it all felt so contrived, odd, and given the people inside the nightclub's clear lust for violence, likely very dangerous.

They needed the use of that train though, and so, Mac nodded to the others in his group and pointed over to the godfather's table.

An hour and several drinks later, Mac, Reese, and the others found themselves

more relaxed as the godfather, also having consumed several more glasses of wine, began to speak to them not as some small time mob dictator, but rather an older man wanting to share stories with others willing to listen.

“I hope the terms of our wager, and Mac’s involvement, didn’t offend any of you. Remember, it wasn’t my idea – it was Cooper’s plan! So Cooper is the one to blame.”

Cooper tipped his hat to the godfather and then looked over at Mac.

“Clearly our best was a lot better than yours sir. Which by the way, is there

something I can call you besides “godfather”? That just sounds, all due respect...damn stupid.”

Bear nodded enthusiastically in response to Cooper’s words.

“Hell yeah! Damn stupid is putting it mildly.”

The godfather took another sip of wine while peeking over his glass at Bear. Returning the glass to the table, he then took his glasses off and began to clean the thick lenses with one of the white napkins that were placed around the table.

“Yes Bear, there was a time I had what you would consider, a regular name. It’s the name of this place – Wilfrid. My family name. But you know, we don’t live in regular times anymore, now do we? So now, I’m simply the godfather, and I stopped trying to be something else, a long time ago. We all play a part Bear...you, me, Mac, all of us. Whether you like it or not, people put you in those shoes and make you walk that walk. So, I just keep walking, and in that regard, I ain’t no different than you.”

Bear shook his head and chuckled.

“What a bowl of bullshit! I don’t play a part I don’t want to. As for my shoes,

they fit me just fine.”

Surprisingly, it was Mac who came to the godfather’s defense.

“Maybe it’s the years, the sense a person gets when they know they have a lot fewer days in front of them than before. I get what he’s saying Bear. The feeling of being trapped by your past, and not enough days left to change your future. I get it.”

The godfather raised his glass to Mac, and took another drink of the dark red wine.

“I was told you were from Louisiana,

Mac. Is that right?”

Mac nodded slowly, his eyes staring down at the table.

“You miss it? Where you come from? Your people?”

Mac left the godfather’s question unanswered for a moment, as his eyes closed and his chin fell down toward his chest.

“Yeah, I suppose I do. Hadn’t thought about it much until recently, but yeah, I miss it.”

The godfather persisted, his voice

hinting at both kindness and understanding for Mac's yearning to return to the place of his birth.

“If you don't mind my asking Mac, where do you see yourself dying, when it's all over? Was it Dominatus? You were up there for what – twenty years? Me...I always wanted to be back in Steubenville. That's a big reason why this place looks like it does you know. The cars and all that. It's me trying to get back to where I came from. Actually, to where my dad grew up. He was always telling me when I was a kid in the 70's how it was all going to hell. He'd say those damn words all the time, man. Over and over again how the

country, the neighborhood, the whole damn world was going to hell, and how better things were back when he was younger in the 1950's. How America was still America. He went on and on about it. Sure glad him and my mom didn't live long enough to see just how bad it really got. So I created Wilfrid. You might think I'm crazy for doing it, you might think I've lost my mind, but I say it's what's keeping me together. I've created something that doesn't exist anymore outside of here in this fucked up world. So call me crazy – I don't give a shit.

But what about you Mac? Where did you plan to be in the end? Back home in

Louisiana?”

Mac leaned back in his chair and looked over at an older woman making her way to the stage to sing one of the Karaoke songs. He recalled Imran saying something about how much the godfather enjoyed Karaoke.

“Yeah, actually, as little sense as it made, I always felt I’d end up back there someday. Somehow. Looks like that won’t happen though. So...whatever.”

Dublin reached over and squeezed Mac’s forearm.

“I never knew that Mac. You felt like

you would go back to Louisiana someday?”

Mac shrugged, his eyes looking into his half full drink glass containing a brand of whiskey the godfather had recommended to him earlier.

“Sure. I don’t know...maybe it was more a feeling of wanting to see it one last time. You know, before I got too old. I do miss it though. The warm weather. The smell of the trees, the food and the music. It wasn’t the perfect place. We had our problems just like anywhere else, but it was my place. My home. My people, and yeah...a part of me always felt like I’d go back.”

The woman who had walked to the stage moments earlier was singing a song she had introduced as “Freight Train” by an artist named Elizabeth Cotton. The crowd grew quiet as her soft voice strained to carry the lyrics out across to those seated at the nightclub tables.

*Freight train, Freight train, run so fast
Please don't tell what train I'm on
They won't know what route I've gone*

*When I am dead and in my grave
No more good times here I crave
Place the stones at my head and feet
Tell them all that I've gone to sleep.*

*When I die, Lord, bury me deep
Way down on old Chestnut street
Then I can hear old Number 9
As she comes rolling by.*

When the woman finished, the godfather stood up and clapped, bowed toward her and began clapping again. Soon, most everyone else in the club followed the godfather's example and began clapping as well.

“That’s Nancy Briggs. Sweet thing from Long Island New York. About the shyest little lady you’ll ever meet, but the voice of an angel. Took me months to get her to sing in front of anyone, but now we can’t keep her off the stage.

Lovely woman.”

Imran tapped the top of the table to get Mac’s attention.

“Mac said he might sing for us tonight. He plays guitar.”

The godfather smiled down at Mac as he snapped a finger.

“That’s right! Imran mentioned that to me the other day. So tell me Mac, will you do us the honor of singing something for tonight? Whatever you want – singer’s choice. Maybe it’ll be the deciding factor in me helping you out with convincing the Russian to take you

to Manitoba. How about it Mac – see if you sing and play as well as you fight? Maybe a little Dean Martin?”

Mac looked to the stage and then back to the godfather.

“I don’t sing Dean Martin. No offense – not my style.”

The godfather smiled again as he leaned down to tap Mac’s shoulder.

“That’s ok! Whatever you want Mac. Like I said – singer’s choice.”

Reese urged Mac to sing, and was soon joined by Dublin and Bear. Even

Cooper Wyse added to the request as he tilted his head toward the stage.

“C’mon Mac. Let’s see what you got.”

Mac shook his head no.

“Don’t have a guitar. Can’t sing without a guitar. Sorry.”

The godfather motioned for Marcini to come to the table.

“Marcini, go get Mac the guitar from upstairs.”

Mac began to feel as if he had walked into another trap.

“Yeah...I mean NO. I play acoustic yes, but I don't know about singing for everyone. That was something I did for the people back in Dominatus. Now...”

Mac's voice trailed off as the godfather sat down again, his right arm reaching out to grab Mac's wrist.

“Mr. Walker, I appreciate your uncertainty. I know this place has to seem odd to you. I know I seem odd to you, but at the end of the day, we're just people like you had in Dominatus. Trying to survive and prosper as much as we can while the world around us chokes on its own brutality. How about

another little side wager between us? You get your old ass up there and sing a song, and I guarantee you I do my best to ensure you get use of the train.”

Imran’s eyes locked with Mac’s, urging him to agree to the terms.

Mac looked to the others and found they too were expecting him to accept.

“Oh hell, fine then. Get me a guitar and I’ll sing for my supper and that goddamn train ride.”

Marcini returned carrying the guitar the godfather had him retrieve. Upon seeing it, Mac’s eyes widened as he took the

instrument from Marcini's hands and gently set it on his lap.

“Is this real? A Gibson L-2? They stopped making these over a hundred years ago!”

Mac's hand brushed the guitar strings.

“It's real. One of the few things I have left from my family. Was my grandfather's. He brought it to America in 1935 when they fled Italy before the war. Mr. Walker, I would be honored to have you play it for me. I, unfortunately...I never learned.”

Mac turned the guitar over in his hands,

then began to lightly strum the strings and adjust the tuning before abruptly pausing.

“Is it ok if I tune it? She needs just a little love.”

The godfather took another sip of his wine while managing to simultaneously nod his head.

“Of course, as long as I get to hear you play it.”

Mac became momentarily lost in the tuning of the guitar. It was the finest acoustic he had ever touched, let alone had the opportunity to play. The aged

wood had a dull, light colored sheen to it, and it smelled of a world and a way of life too long forgotten in this modern era of global governance. Mac regretted his earlier judgment against the godfather's character. The man wasn't insane, simply nostalgic – a yearning for a better and simpler time Mac understood all too well himself. A time when those you once loved were again alive, and well, and still part of your own life.

Mac rose from his seat with the guitar clutched in his right hand as he made the short walk to the stage area. Even before he put his feet atop the raised platform, the audience inside the

nightclub was cheering for him.

Turning to face the microphone, Mac felt a twinge of pain shoot down to his lower back, causing him to wince.

“If it’s ok with all of you, I’d like to sit down here while I play. That little demonstration we had for you earlier has me all tuckered out.”

Again the people of Wilfrid cheered and clapped for Mac as Marcini placed a stool next to him.

Mac eased himself down onto the stool while resting the guitar on the top of his thighs.

“You know, just a little over an hour ago, I was thinking to myself how insane this place was. How stupid and silly all the old cars and everything...well...you know how you got this town set up. I’m starting to get it now though. I really am. When I was younger, I wasn’t much for talking. Sure as hell not for talking in front of a bunch of people like you. I’m old enough now though...plenty old enough, that I know I’m running out of time to say the things I want to say. I kinda wish I had taken that time to say those things to people who deserved to hear it before it was too late.”

Mac paused as he gathered his thoughts,

while all of the faces seated in front of him watched intently for what he would say next.

“You see, you live long enough, you realize just how many people you loved are no longer with you anymore. Maybe back when they were still around, you let all the other things get in the way of letting them know how much they meant to you. Or, you let your fears, or arrogance, or resentment, speak for you because the words just seemed like too much trouble. I don’t know. I really don’t. I’m just an old man now, sitting up here, talking nonsense. Or at least for some of you, it comes off sounding like that. I promise you though, some day,

you'll understand. At least some of it – you really will.

The one you all call the godfather, sitting right there, he promised to help us get where we need to go if I sing you a little song. Now I ain't played much since... since Dominatus was blown to hell by the drones a couple years back. We made them pay a price for that though. We fought back. I was told most of you already heard about that.”

Mac was interrupted by a smattering of applause that soon grew in volume. There was no love for the New United Nations in this room. He waited for the room to go quiet and then continued.

“Now a long time ago, I was just a kid from a middle class American family in a small, Mississippi River town of Carville, Louisiana. I grew up riding my bike, and trading baseball cards, and getting into just enough trouble to keep things interesting, while trying to keep out of too much trouble so my dad didn’t take the belt to me. Back then I sometimes thought how dull and boring my life was. How annoying and overly strict my parents could be at times. I dreamed of being free of all that. Free of them. Free of that life.

Now it seems most my dreams are filled with wishing I had that life back...had

my parents back. What I wouldn't do to see my mom and dad just one more time. Tell them thanks. Tell them I loved them. Goddamn do I miss them something terrible."

Mac paused again as he looked down at this feet while his fingers began to strum the guitar. When he looked back up, he spotted Dublin wiping tears away from her eyes, and felt a momentary pang of guilt for making her cry.

"I have new family these days though - those of us who walked out of Dominatus alive. I'm doing my best to protect them, at least as much as a tired, used up old man can. So I guess I should

sing you a song. Again, I apologize if my playing isn't so good. Even at its best, it wasn't much. And I know I can't sing for shit, but whatever. Here's a song I remember my dad singing along to in the car on the way to what he called our secret fishing hole just outside Carville. It was just a small nothing pond tucked away among the trees just off a little gravel road where you could hook into a decent sized catfish now and then. If we caught some fish, we'd bring 'em back to Mom and she'd fry them up for dinner while Dad would keep telling her we were eating for free because I'd brought home the catch of the day. Every time he'd say it, the taste of that fish just got better and better.

Seems like the older I get, it's those little memories that grow bigger and bigger in my heart. I've done a hell of a lot of wrong in my life, but it's those memories that keep reminding me of the right I've done too. Maybe some of you can relate."

Mac began to pluck more forcefully at the guitar strings, the chords soon enveloping the nightclub. His eyes closed as he raised his head just slightly, his mind focusing on the lyrics of a song that was much more memory than music to him, his roughened whisper voice reaching back to the people and places of many decades ago as he struggled to

inhale enough breath from cancer-laden lungs to sing into the microphone.

*There is... a house... in New Orleans,
they call the Rising Sun.
And it's been the ruin of many a poor
boy,
and God... I know... I'm one.*

*My mother was a tailor.
She sewed my new blue jeans.
My father was a gamblin' man,
down... in New... Orleans.*

*Now the only thing a gambler needs,
is a suitcase and trunk.*

*And the only time he's satisfied,
is when he's on a drunk.*

*Oh mother, tell your children,
not to do what I have done.
Spend your lives in sin and misery,
in the House... of the Rising... Sun.*

*Well, I got one foot on the platform,
The other foot on the train.
I'm goin' back to New Orleans,
To wear... that ball... and chain.*

*Well, there is... a house... in New
Orleans,
They call... the Rising... Sun.
And it's been... the ruin... of many a
poor boy,*

And God... I know... I'm one...

And God...I know...I'm one...

XXVIII.

Imran arrived at the guest house to take Mac and the others to meet the Russian whose train they hoped would transport them across the many miles of difficult terrain and Muslim-controlled territories of Canada.

All but Cooper were inside the house when Imran arrived. The rancher had taken Brando to the backyard area so the

dog could relieve himself before getting into Imran's transport vehicle.

“Good morning again! I hope you all slept well after last night!”

Mac gave Imran a short nod as he walked into the kitchen for a drink of water. His throat was sore from the several bouts of coughing when he awoke in the morning. He had enjoyed several hours of uninterrupted sleep though, which he was very thankful for.

Bear was eating the last of an apple, while Dublin and Reese were sitting together on a couch in the home's main room. Dublin rose to greet Imran, giving

the small man a hug.

“Good morning to you Imran. Cooper is in the back, but we are all ready to go.”

Imran nodded as he began to help the others bring their packs and equipment to his truck. When Reese stepped outside and felt the sting of cold air, his body involuntarily shivered as the temperature bit through his winter coat.

“Wow, a lot colder than yesterday.”

Bear, who was only wearing an off-white sweatshirt and jeans, clapped Reese on the back as he walked toward Imran’s transport truck.

“Toughen up pansy. Just a little cold.”

Brando ran past Reese to the driveway where he watched Mac place one of the backpacks onto the truck bed. Cooper soon joined them as well.

“No godfather this morning, huh?”

Imran shook his head at Cooper.

“No – he has other business. There was some kind of incident very early this morning. I was told to stop off at the medical center before heading out to the Russian. He wanted to show us something.”

Cooper's mouth curled down into a frown as he looked back at Imran.

“Any idea what it is?”

Imran said no, but that they needed to be there soon. He didn't like to keep the godfather waiting.

Mac and Dublin again joined Imran in the front of the truck while Reese, Bear, and Cooper Wyse, along with Brando, sat down in the back. Imran pulled slowly away from the guest house and made his way back onto Wilfrid's Main Street, where he turned right and drove for another half mile before turning left

into an alley that ended in front of a small building sheathed in silver metal siding. A sign was placed over the entrance door that read “Wilfrid Medical Center”.

Imran exited the truck with the rest of the group following him into the medical center building. Cooper paused to tell Brando to stay before hopping down from the truck bed. The first room Imran entered was a small reception area where a friendly woman in her forties, with short black hair and bangs that hung just above her dark eyes, smiled warmly at Imran and the others as they walked through the door.

“Good morning Imran! I was told to expect some guests today. Quite a bit of activity going on downstairs. Go ahead and let yourself in – there’s security that’s been posted, but they know you’re coming. Last door at the end of the hall on the left, in case you didn’t remember.”

Imran smiled back at the woman and told her thank you, before motioning for the group to follow him through a second door that opened up into a long, narrow, well lit hallway.

“This is what we use as a hospital here in Wilfrid. The first door here is an examination room. The second door on

my left opens up into the procedures room. The door to my right here is a trauma room. Where we are going though is downstairs – the morgue.”

Mac’s face winced.

“Lovely.”

Imran and the others reached the end of the hall where a tall, uniformed man stood holding an M-16. Imran simply nodded to the man and walked past him through another door that revealed concrete steps downward to yet another door constructed entirely of plated steel, at least three inches thick, and painted white. There was a code box on the

door's right side which Imran quickly pushed four numbers into. A loud buzzing noise filled the confines of the stairwell followed by the door opening inward.

“Not only is this our morgue, but it can be used as a bomb shelter if needed. We are nearly thirty feet underground now.”

Imran led the group down another narrow hallway before stopping at another door on his left. That door too had an armed man standing outside of it. He nodded down at Imran and then looked at the others before indicating they could open the door.

The small room was just above freezing. In the middle was a single, stainless steel autopsy table that was surrounded by three men. The godfather was the first to turn around as Imran and the others walked in.

“Good! Glad to see you made it on time. Hello everyone. Hope you don’t get squeamish easily, because what you’re about to see is the stuff of nightmares. Gonna keep me awake at nights for months.”

The godfather tapped the shoulder of the man to his left who was wearing a white medical jacket. He was about six foot, mid-fifties, with neatly combed grey

hair, and a white goatee.

Dr. Michaels, these are Imran and his friends. They've been visiting us the last couple days. Maybe they might know something about this... thing we got laid up in here."

The man introduced as Dr. Michaels nodded his head in greeting while offering a thin smile, but said nothing. The godfather then turned to the uniformed man on his right, who was not much taller than the godfather, though much heavier – almost fat. A round, red face sat atop a very thick neck while a pair of almost coal black eyes peered back at Imran and the others.

“And this is Cap, my head of security. Spent, what was it Cap – twenty years as a Canadian Mountie?”

Cap nodded once.

“Twenty one years, yeah.”

The godfather motioned for the group to come forward to look at what lay atop the autopsy table.

“C’mon then, you have to take a look at this. One of our patrols shot it dead this morning. Actually, shot at about thirty of them running across the road into Wilfrid. They were making a hell of a

racket apparently. Giving off these high pitched, shrieking screams. This was the only one they hit. Blew the top of its head right off.”

Mac was the first to look down at the table as Imran, Reese, and the others gathered around either side of him.

The seeker’s hairless skin was a mottled, darkish grey color. Its chest had already been cut open and examined, and not yet stitched back up. As the godfather said, the top of its head was a disfigured mass of bone and brain. The mouth was grotesquely wide, and even though partially closed, its many teeth could be seen gleaming from behind its

almost non-existent lips.

It was indeed, the thing of nightmares.

Cooper Wyse pointed to where its genitals should have been.

“What sex is this thing supposed to be?”

Dr. Michaels gave a thin smile at Cooper’s question.

“I wondered the same thing. It is neither male or female. No sexual organs of any kind. No way for any food to be taken in or waste evacuated from the body except one – its mouth.”

Bear's face contorted into a look of disgust.

“You saying that thing eats and shits from the same place – its mouth?”

The doctor nodded.

“Basically, yes. Note the large hump on its back. It's actually an energy reserve, similar to a camel storing water. These things can go for extended periods without food or drink by simply accessing the reserves in that hump. According to the patrol that shot this... creature, they move exceedingly fast. The hands and feet are designed to grasp the ground and propel the body forward,

similar to a monkey. The musculature suggests that for their size, they are very strong. Given the teeth, and the clawed appendages, I think it is safe to assume one of us would not wish to face even one of these things alone.”

Mac’s eyes narrowed as he looked more closely at an area just below the back of the seeker’s head.

“What is that there? Looks like a little...like a box.”

The doctor reached a surgical gloved hand and removed from the area Mac had just referred to, something that did in fact look like a small, black metallic

box.

“This thing was attached to the creature’s brain stem. It is, I believe, some kind of transmitting device. I’m not a geneticist, but I am almost certain these things were created in a lab. I did run a very basic DNA test of the thing’s tissue and confirmed significant human factors involved.”

Reese looked at the doctor, his eyes widening for a moment.

“Human? These things are part human?”

The doctor again nodded.

“Oh yes, very much so. And the human factors are a mixture of single adult’s DNA, and several fetal DNA structures. I can’t test beyond that because I have neither the training or equipment, but this creature was definitely a manufactured product from somewhere. I would have to assume it is connected to a New United Nations program, because I don’t know of anyone else who would have the resources to pull something like this off. It is quite a scientific accomplishment.”

Cooper turned away from the autopsy table shaking his head.

“That’s no accomplishment doctor. That

there is the work of evil. That thing was never intended for this earth. We are truly spitting in the eye of God now, and there's gonna be hell to pay for the people who did this.”

The godfather looked at Mac, and then back to the dead seeker.

“None of you seem that surprised at seeing this thing, so I’m guessing you know something about it. These things were following you from Alaska, right?”

Mac nodded, then tilted his head at Imran.

“He knew about them too, called them

seekers. So I'm guessing you and your people knew about them before we did."

The godfather looked at Cap, who in turn responded to Mac's statement.

"We heard reports of people spotting them. The Russian was one of the witnesses. Said he saw some man-monster dart across the tracks a few weeks ago. Some Muslim bandits were apparently attacked to the south last year, maybe a hundred miles from here. That's when we first heard the term seekers. It's what the Muslims call them. And one of our own patrols said they saw something a few months ago, thought maybe it was a bear, but weren't

sure. It was dark, and the thing moved fast.”

The doctor pointed to the thing’s face.

“The term seeker is actually quite appropriate given the creature’s ability to smell. It has large olfactory receptors, larger even than a dog’s.”

Cooper had turned back around and looked down at the seeker.

‘So that thing is part bloodhound huh?’

The doctor gave Cooper a thin smile.

“Yes, you could put it that way. These

things are likely capable of tracking someone at least as well as a bloodhound – probably better. Certainly faster.”

The godfather placed a medical blanket over the seeker’s corpse and turned to Mac.

“I need to show you all something else before you go to see the Russian. These things running around out there aren’t the only monsters you need to worry about. I need you to see something that convinces you there’s other monsters waiting for you. As deadly and disgusting as this thing laying on the table right here.”

Mac looked down at the godfather, sensing the urgency coming from the smaller man's tone of voice.

“What is it you need to show us?”

The godfather pointed to the stairwell behind them, wanting to take the group back upstairs.

“A video.”

XXIX.

The group followed the godfather

upstairs, through the examination room, and into the private office of Dr. Michaels. There they found a large wall monitor and six chairs for them to sit in.

“Please have a seat. What I am about to show you was footage taken six months ago by a group of Muslims who had encountered some former residents of Wilfrid. These residents were just a small family. A father, a mother, and three children – a young boy of ten, and two daughters aged nine and seven. They had resided here with us for about five years, but had decided they wanted to live in an abandoned cabin they had found during an earlier camping trip that was to the east of Wilfrid alongside a

small lake about seventy miles from here. They thought they'd be far enough from the road, and certainly any urban areas, that it would be nearly as safe as living here.

They were wrong. I had tried to convince them not to go. The husband, a young man named Gerald Wilkinson, ignored my warnings. They had friends here who warned them as well, but those warnings too were ignored. So they left here one morning, much like you are planning to do today, and set off to that lake that was just over the hill. That's how Gerald put it to me personally – they were just going over the hill.

They made it to the cabin apparently. Our patrol report indicated it appeared they had been there for about a week, and were in the middle of fixing the place up. At some point around that time, they were paid a visit by a group of Muslim bandits who likely had been watching them since they left Wilfrid. What you will see is all too common behavior by these Muslims. They are animals and will not think twice about killing you if given the opportunity. There were likely ten or so of them, and...well, I'm going to let the footage speak for itself.”

The wall monitor came to life, revealing dark, grainy video of the inside of what

was likely the lake cabin the godfather had just referenced. The voices of several men could be heard speaking Arabic as the image finally rested on a man and woman bound and gagged and placed next to one another on their knees.

The godfather pointed to the two figures.

“As you likely already realized, that is Gerald Wilkinson and his wife Kate. The children are off camera.”

One of the Muslim bandits stood behind Gerald Wilkinson and placed a small knife at his throat as two other bandits held him down by the shoulders to limit

his ability to struggle. Even with the poor quality of the video one could see Kate Wilkinson's eyes grow wide with horror as her muffled screams momentarily drowned out the shouts of the bandits.

The man standing behind Kate's husband was repeating the same line over and over again, shouting it louder each time.

As his eyes were fixated on the screen, Mac let the others know what was being said.

“He's shouting death to all infidels and god is great.”

The bandit pressed his knife down into the flesh of Gerald Wilkinson's neck and then rapidly jerked the blade from left to right several times. Kate Wilkinson attempted to move toward her husband and stop the man from cutting him, but another bandit came into the camera's view and violently grabbed her by her hair until she fell onto her back where he then placed the heel of his boot on top of her chest to hold her down.

Gerald Wilkinson began to make a horrific wheezing sound as the bandit's knife began to cut into his wind pipe. Because none of the major arteries of the neck had yet been severed, Gerald was still very aware of what was being done

to him, and yet made no attempt to rise from the floor or fight his would-be killer.

“Why isn’t he fighting back?”

Bear’s question was posed to no-one in particular, but he wanted an answer.

The godfather pointed to the bottom of the screen.

“It is most likely the Wilkinson’s children are just off camera being held in front of the parents. They probably have knives or guns pointed at them, and their father has been told that if he attempts to fight back, he will watch as

his children are killed right in front of him.”

Gerald Wilkinson’s wheezing grew louder, as a flap of skin from his throat could be seen moving into and out of the bleeding gash as he struggled for each breath. The bandit that had initiated the cutting of Gerald’s throat was growing tired and motioned for someone to continue the work he was too weary to finish. Another man entered the screen and laughed as he pointed to Gerald’s neck, taking the small knife and cutting with even more ferocity than the first Muslim bandit had. Soon the bleeding from the wound increased significantly as the knife cut into an artery. Gerald

Wilkinson's eyes rolled into the back of his head, and his struggles stopped completely, though his body continued to be held up. The only sounds from the footage were the increasingly labored breathing of the bandit who continued to cut threw the flesh and bone of Gerald's neck, and the sobs of his wife Kate.

Another of the bandits walked up to Gerald's body and pulled his head sharply to the side three times in an attempt to break the neck. A loud snapping sound could be heard on the video tape, as the bandit holding the knife began hacking away at the final bits of tendon at the back of Gerald Wilkinson's neck. Moments later he

grabbed the top of Gerald's severed head and held it out in front of him as several shouts of "God is great" in Arabic drowned out all other sound.

Throwing the head to the side, the bandit who still held the knife motioned for Kate Wilkinson to be raised from the floor of the cabin. Her face was devoid of almost all expression as she stared into the camera. One of the men kicked her in the back and sent her falling forward onto her face, unable to catch her fall due to her hands being tightly bound behind her. Again she was forced back up into a kneeling position, and again her face showed no emotion, though blood could be seen dripping

down from her nose. The bandit with the knife leaned down in front of Kate Wilkinson and began screaming at her, slapping her face, and scratching her throat.

Again Mac interpreted what was being said.

“They are calling her a whore, a breeder of infidels, a slut of Babylon.”

What was viewed next even caused Mac to blink several times in shock.

The knife was suddenly plunged several times into each of Kate Wilkinson’s eye sockets, leaving two gaping, bloody

holes where her eyes once were. The mother of three screamed at first, but then again grew silent.

Dublin looked away as Bear cursed under his breath. Cooper and Reese remained still and silent.

Again the men began to chant “God is great” as the knife began to cut into the neck of Kate Wilkinson. She did not struggle, or cry out, but appeared to simply await the inevitable. There was no fight left in her – only the release of death. When her head too was held up for the camera, the bandit holding it walked closer to allow the viewers a better look at his face.

He was heavily bearded, so his age was difficult to determine. His dark eyes reflected brightly inside the camera lens against the dim light of the cabin, and a very visible large scar ran from the bottom of his left eye to the left corner of his mouth. He began to shout something that sounded unlike anything else the bandits had been screaming of before.

Mac looked over at the godfather before telling the others what was being said. Imran closed his eyes and slowly shook his head.

“He is saying the children of the infidels will be sold into slavery, and will fetch

a very good price. He also says that soon the streets of Wilfrid will run thick with the blood of all those who oppose Allah and that from there, a great holy army will spread across the lands of Alaska.”

The wall monitor went dark as the godfather turned to face Mac and the others in the room.

“That is what you will be up against out there. Granted, if you are able to convince the Russian to help, you’ll be on the train, which will provide you some protection, but if you come upon any of these Muslims, please for the love of God – kill on sight. Don’t entertain

the thought, even for a second, they are nothing but the most dangerous and sickening animals you will ever find. I assume you've already come with weapons to protect yourselves, so please make sure you use them. Shoot to kill, every time, until you reach the priest in Churchill."

Mac rose from his seat and soon the rest did as well, though none of them cared to say anything after viewing the horror of what happened to the Wilkinson family. The godfather walked with them outside until they all stood beside Imran's transport truck.

"I've messaged the Russian. He knows

my wishes to see him assist you with transport on the train. I cannot guarantee that will be enough. He is...he's always been his own man, and a very stubborn one at that. But if he does agree to help, you won't find a more loyal and dedicated partner in your journey. He's different, but he's honorable. Mac, thank you again for the fight last night, the conversation, and the song. I hope that you do manage to make it back down to Louisiana some day."

Mac looked back at the godfather and smiled as he shook his hand.

"You make sure to protect yourselves. If there really is some Muslim uprising

coming this way, you need to be prepared.”

“Thank you Mac – we already are.”

Soon Imran’s truck was driving away from Wilfrid on the short journey to the Russian. Mac glanced out the passenger window as the town made in the image of 1950’s small town America faded from view, sensing he would never see it, its people, or the godfather again.

XXX.

There was no road leading to where the

Russian was located, and the ride grew increasingly harsh, especially for those sitting in the back of Imran's transport vehicle. Even Brando was having difficulty keeping his balance. Bear in particular appeared bothered by the violent bouncing as the truck drove over several jutting rocks.

“For somebody who's supposed to be so important, you'd think they would have invested a little bit into making some kind of road between here and there.”

Cooper looked over at Bear and then up at the cloud covered sky.

“The Russian is a different sort. Almost

a hermit. Doesn't like company."

Reese grabbed the side of the truck bed as yet another jolt shook the vehicle.

"Is he as trustworthy as the godfather said he was?"

Cooper scratched the several days worth of beard growth on his face as he contemplated Reese's question.

"Yeah – I suppose he is. Never heard of him not finishing a job that he said he'd take on. Stories about how he travels right into the heart of some of the worst Muslim areas has made him something of a legend. How true those stories are,

I'm not sure. He's always delivered for Imran though, I know that."

Imran turned the transport truck sharply to the left and began to descend down a hill where at the bottom was a large structure with a sharply sloping steel roof. The truck paused halfway down the hill and Imran gave four, evenly spaced honks of the vehicle's horn.

Bear leaned up to peer over the roof cabin down to the building. His eyes spotted railroad tracks that appeared to run right through the middle of the structure. He could also see several dark piles of coal that leaned up against the one of the walls of the building.

Each pile was covered with a light blue tarp.

Imran again proceeded down the remainder of the hill until the truck was parked just outside of the building. Again he honked the horn four times and then waited.

After several minutes, the single door that marked the entrance into the steel roofed building opened up, and a short but powerfully built man with shoulder length grey hair and an enormous, grey and black beard stepped outside. He stared intently at Imran for another few seconds before walking toward the transport truck. Mac was the first to

notice the man had a handgun stuffed into the front of his dark cotton pants.

“He’s armed.”

Imran nodded.

“Oh yes – always armed. Look up there.”

Mac followed Imran’s finger that was pointing halfway up the large building where the unmistakable black metallic glint of a large rifle was poking out of small opening. Mac instantly recognized the type of weapon it was.

“That’s a Minimi machine gun, very

serious firepower. Haven't seen one of those in years, but they were the shit back in the day. Belgian made. Extremely reliable. They could rip us into shreds right now if they wanted to. We're all sitting in here like sardines in a can."

The Russian stopped some ten feet from Imran's truck and motioned for just Imran to step out.

"You. Just you. Not the others."

The man's gruff voice barked the order to Imran while his right hand tucked itself into the front of his pants alongside the handgun. Both Mac and Dublin were

fascinated by the mass of unruly hair and beard covering the man's head. Even the eyebrows that sat above his close set dark eyes spread out so thickly across the forehead they resembled a mustache more than eyebrows

Imran looked back at Mac and Dublin and smiled.

“It's ok. I will talk to him first, then you can meet him as well.”

The Russian was just a couple of inches taller than Imran, though his shoulders were far more broad. Unusually long arms were complimented by massive forearms and wrists, and ended in

equally large and powerful looking hands. As he spoke with Imran, the Russian glanced back at the others in the transport truck with suspicion, shaking his head at whatever Imran was telling him. Finally he uttered one single word and turned to walk back toward the building.

“Nyet!”

Imran took a few steps to follow the Russian, who in turn spun around and pushed the smaller man back with enough force Imran fell to the ground. Seeing this, Bear jumped from the back of the transport truck and began to walk quickly toward the Russian. Mac

spotted Bear as he passed by the passenger window.

“Oh shit.”

Bear was already glowering over the Russian by the time Mac exited the cabin of the transport truck. Imran had regained his feet and was attempting to step between both Bear and the Russian.

“Gentlemen please, it is ok! I am fine Bear! Fine!”

The Russian then did something rather extraordinary that shocked everyone – particularly Bear. His right hand snapped upward until his powerful, thick

fingers held the front half of the taller man's throat. Bear's eyes grew wide as he felt the considerable strength within the Russian begin to block his airway.

Without thinking, Bear responded by doing the very same thing to the Russian. His right hand grasped the shorter man's throat and squeezed as Imran grabbed Bear's forearm and attempted in vain to have him release the Russian.

By then the others were standing around both Bear and the Russian as the two men glared back at the other, each of them unwilling to release the other's throat. Bear's face had gone a deep red,

and a massive vein popped out from both sides of his forehead. Though the Russian's face was hidden behind the mass of beard, an opening within that beard revealed strong white teeth as the man smiled up at Bear.

The former NFL lineman fell to his right knee, his oxygen-starved red face turning a deeper purple. Still the Russian held onto Bear's throat, the smile growing wider and his fingers digging deeper.

Imran shouted for the Russian to let Bear go, but his pleas were ignored. Dublin and Reese too began to shout for him to do the same. Mac grew concerned enough to consider drawing his weapon

on the Russian, but before he had the half second needed to make the decision, another member of the group came to Bear's defense.

Brando's teeth sunk deep into the Russian's forearm as the dog's head shook violently from side to side as the Doberman demanded the death grip on Bear's throat was released. The Russian held that grip for a moment longer as he looked calmly down at the Doberman, his mind seemingly trying to process what kind of dog Brando was. There was no fear in the Russian's eyes, or even a hint of pain – only simple curiosity.

That curiosity quickly transformed itself into attempted action though, as the Russian's left hand moved to remove the handgun from the front of his pants. This resulted in the barrel of one of Cooper Wyse's Colt Revolvers pressing against the head of the Russian.

“No-no-no. Don't mess with my dog.”

The Russian glanced to his left to look into Cooper's eyes, and he apparently saw something that convinced him the rancher was very serious in following through with his threat.

“Brando – release.”

The Doberman instantly followed Cooper's order and released his bite on the Russian's forearm. The Russian in turn, let Bear go, causing the larger man to fall onto the ground gasping for air.

Cooper Wyse looked back at the Russian and gave him a thin smile as he stepped back a few steps with the Colt six shooter still in his right hand.

“Thank you.”

Dublin and Reese helped Bear back to his feet. The big man was looking down at the Russian with a mixture of confusion and disbelief. Never before in Bear's adult life had another human

being been able to best him in a test of strength.

After rolling back the thick sleeve of his jacket to inspect his arm, and then apparently deciding there were no serious injuries from Brando's bite, the Russian again turned back toward his building as Imran followed beside him and implored the Russian to take the job.

“They will pay you for the trip Yakov! They will pay you very well!”

Still the Russian refused.

“Nyet! I am too busy! Manitoba – too far!”

Imran persisted.

“The godfather wants you to do this Yakov. He would consider it a personal favor to him.”

The Russian turned to face Imran, then looked back at the group who stood together behind Mac and Cooper.

“You take my business while I am gone. Manitoba is many days there and back. Very dangerous. The godfather...can go fuck himself. You...them...go fuck yourselves.”

Cooper Wyse stepped forward.

“I got gold. You take us to Manitoba, it’s yours.”

The Russian’s eyes, peering out from under those massive black and grey eyebrows, bored into Cooper, who in turn stared calmly back as Brando sat next to him.

“How much?”

Cooper Wyse shrugged.

“Enough.”

The Russian began walking quickly toward Cooper, causing Brando to issue

a low warning growl.

“Show me.”

Cooper opened his jacket and reached into an inner pocket and extracted a small leather pouch. He removed a single, gold flinted nugget and held it out for the Russian to see.

“Got about three pounds of gold. I know that can buy you a fair amount of stuff on the Black Market down here.”

The Russian shook his head as he waived a dismissive hand toward Cooper Wyse.

“Not enough. Need double that. Long trip. Very dangerous.”

Dublin leaned over and whispered into Mac’s left ear.

“The drone gun. That has to be worth a lot.”

Mac glanced back at Dublin, considering her idea.

Imran, already sensing what Mac and Dublin were considering, put both of his hands up to the Russian and smiled.

“Please – wait here. We will discuss other options.”

The Russian glared back at Imran, but did not move.

Imran walked over to the others and whispered to Mac.

“Are you thinking of giving him the drone gun?”

Mac nodded and looked over at Cooper.

“Fine with me. We need to get on that train.”

Imran nodded.

“Ok then. It is a very good sign that he’s

waiting to hear what else we have to offer. That means he wants to negotiate. I will make this deal happen for you.”

Imran returned to where the Russian stood waiting.

“Yakov, we have something very rare, very much in demand for anyone fearing the drones. A weapon designed to shoot them from the sky. Portable. One person can use it. You could keep it here to protect your home.”

The Russian said nothing for nearly a minute as he looked back at Imran. Finally he responded.

“You have this thing? Now? This weapon is here now?”

Mac walked to the back of the transport vehicle and brought out the laser gun and held it up for the Russian to see.

“Yeah, it’s here. And it works. We already shot down a drone the other day.”

The Russian’s eyes stared at the anti-drone gun in Mac’s hand. He wanted it badly.

“I can take you halfway. Payment of gold and the drone gun. That will get you halfway to Manitoba. That is very

good offer.”

Imran shook his head and then handed the Russian what looked to be a small piece of paper.

“This is a note the godfather requested I hand to you personally Yakov. He said you would understand and then do the right thing.”

Yakov grabbed the note from Imran and read it slowly, his right hand scratching the mop of unruly hair atop his head as he did so. He then stuffed the paper in his pocket turned his head to look back at the building behind him.

“Shit. This come from the godfather?”

Imran nodded.

The Russian paused again and then nodded toward the group before turning to walk back into the large, steel roofed building.

“Ok. We go. We go now. Be ready. Ten minutes.”

Imran smiled back at Mac and the others.

“Please hurry and unload your things from my truck. Once the Russian makes up his mind, he moves very quickly. If

he says ten minutes, he means it.”

Dublin walked up to Imran to ask a question.

“What did that note say?”

Imran looked toward the Russian’s building and then back up at Dublin.

“A few years ago, one of Yokav’s daughters became very ill, a rare form of Leukemia. She was dying. The typical cancer vaccine is hard enough to get in Canada. The New United Nations tries very hard to prevent any of it from getting smuggled outside of government approved zones. In this case, because of

the type of Leukemia, the vaccine available was even more rare. Very-very tough to access for anyone up here. The Russian begged the godfather to help him save his daughter. Two months later, the vaccine arrived. Even I don't know how the godfather obtained it, but it had to have been very expensive. Today, for your trip to Manitoba, the godfather was willing to call in that favor owed to him by the Russian for saving his daughter. I was told not to use the note unless I had to. Well...I felt I had to, and Yakov, being an honorable man, agreed to pay the debt owed to the godfather. He will pay that debt by taking you to the priest in Manitoba.”

A massive door began to slide open in the front portion of the building, revealing the front of a dark black locomotive. Mac, Bear, Cooper, and Reese stood next to Dublin and Imran, looking in wonder at the Russian's train. Inside the building, the Russian, three young girls, and a woman, could be seen moving swiftly in and then back out of the train.

Yakov pointed to the group and motioned for them to come inside the building.

“Put your things in the passenger car. Back there.”

Mac and the others walked into the building and then back to the last part of the train, a large, square passenger car that had been meticulously restored to its former glory. Imran opened the rear door and motioned for the others to come inside.

“This passenger car is over a hundred and twenty years old. Used to run the main line between Seattle and Vancouver when the wealthy would return to their summer homes up north. The Russian spent nearly two years fixing it up, replacing parts, sanding and staining the wood...it is now quite beautiful. There is a small cooking area, seats that convert to beds, and even a

self contained bathroom! And look here, a chess set! Playing cards! Books that were published when this train was still in service!”

Dublin couldn't help but smile at Imran's enthusiasm over the passenger car. She admitted to herself it was a remarkable restoration and would certainly provide them some very comfortable travel accommodations to Manitoba.

The Russian entered the passenger car and looked down at the assorted backpacks that were sitting on the floor.

“Put those by your seats. Out of the

way. Then go back outside and wait.”

Imran pointed toward the front of the train.

“The train is taken out from the building by a pulley before it is started up. He wants us to go back outside before he begins to take the train out.”

Mac and the others followed Imran back outside and watched as the Russian crawled under the front of the locomotive and placed a large iron clamp over a steel ring hanging from the bottom of the machine. He then walked quickly over to a large wheel bolted onto the interior wall of the building and

began to turn it slowly clockwise. The sound of a chain moving through some kind of pulley echoed inside the building as the train began to move forward to the outside. Reese pointed to the train tracks.

“He has a manually powered pulley system inside the tracks. Just hook it onto the train and it can pull it frontwards or back from inside the building. This guy must have some serious mechanical skills.”

Imran nodded at Reese’s observation.

“Oh yes – the Russian can fix or build just about anything.”

Unlike Reese, who was focused on how the Russian was moving the train by turning the wheel inside the building, Mac's attention was focused on something he saw at the very front of the locomotive.

“Well I'll be damned, will you look at that?” He's got a Ronson flamethrower hooked up to the front of that thing! Looks like an old tank unit system.”

After the train was completely out of the building, the Russian jumped inside the locomotive cab and began shoveling coal into the flame box, building up the heat that would eventually create the

steam to power the train. Soon he was joined by one of his daughters who grabbed her own shovel and worked nearly as quickly as her father. Yakov's smile could be seen flashing through his beard as he looked over at the girl working so hard to help him prepare the train.

Imran whispered to the others standing next to him.

“That was the daughter who was dying from the cancer.”

Nearly ten minutes went by before Yakov and his daughter stopped filling the flame box with coal and stepped

back outside where his other two daughters and wife were waiting. The Russian kneeled down to kiss the foreheads of each of his daughters before standing back up and hugging his wife. Yakov pointed to the machine gun housed in the second floor of the building.

“As always – anyone come, shoot. No questions. Just shoot.”

Yakov’s wife, her long blonde hair tied back behind her, appeared to be at least ten years younger than her husband. Hearing his instructions, she simply nodded and hugged him again, repeating several times that he was to come home.

The Russian turned to face the group and pointed to the passenger car.

“Get on. If you need to see me, walk the plank on the side. Don’t fall. You fall, you probably die.”

The plank Yakov referred to was a one foot wide wood beam that ran the length of the passenger car and from which one could, if they were careful, walk alongside the train as it was moving, in order to reach the front.

The Russian paused as the group was about to walk into the passenger car.

“Also...if we are being attacked, open windows and shoot. Very simple.”

Bear watched as Yakov jumped into the locomotive cabin, his hand still rubbing the bottom of his neck. The Russian began frantically using a manual blower to speed up the process of heating the fire box.

Everyone in the group then turned around to find Imran standing alone, not moving toward the train. His face betrayed the sadness he was feeling.

“I cannot go with you my friends. I must continue to transport goods for the godfather, especially in the absence of

the Russian. That was part of the deal.”

Mac was the first to reach Imran, his hand extended out in front of him.

“Glad to have gotten to know you Imran – and thank you for all the help.”

Dublin, Reese, and Bear were the next to tell Imran goodbye. Cooper and Brando were the last to walk up to the small man. Cooper tilted his hat upward slightly and then shrugged.

“Don’t care much for goodbyes Imran, so let’s just leave it at see you later, and call it good.”

Imran ignored Cooper's words and wrapped his arms around the rancher.

“Be safe Coop. Be safe.”

Imran then leaned down and hugged Brando as well.

“You too Brando. Keep an eye out for everyone, ok?”

The Doberman pulled his lips back and gave Imran a particularly enthusiastic snarling smile.

Dublin and Reese sat next to each other staring out one of the many windows of the passenger car as the Russian's family

looked back at them. Yakov's wife appeared particularly unhappy to see her husband being temporarily taken away from them. One of the girls though, the one who had been saved from dying of Leukemia, smiled back and waived as the train began to inch its way forward on the track, picking up speed as large clouds billowed out from the locomotive's smoke stack.

Within another twenty minutes the train's speed had increased significantly. The landscape was one of flat, snow covered terrain for as far as the eye could see. Reese estimated the train to be moving at nearly twenty miles an hour and travelling south east. He looked over at

Cooper, who was sitting silently staring out the window nearest to his own seat.

“You know where we are heading Coop?”

The rancher looked over at Reese and then back to the window.

“Has to be going through a place called Terrace. It used to be one of the main hubs for this part of Canada. From there he’ll likely cut northeast to Dawson Creek. We’ll want to keep as north as possible, stay away from the bigger urban areas where the more powerful Muslim warlords are found. I don’t know much about what is after Dawson

Creek though. I know we have a few mountain passes to get through, weather's gonna get real cold, but hopefully, we'll be making pretty good time. If there's no trouble, we could make Churchill, Manitoba in about four days. That's if the Russian sleeps at least a little. He can't stay awake shoveling coal to keep us going all that time. Even he has to rest up."

Bear sat down next to Cooper and stretched his neck, trying to keep it from stiffening up after his encounter with Yakov.

"That guy's one of the strongest men I've ever met, and during my football days, I

played with some beasts. Another ten seconds of him squeezing me like that and I'd have passed out."

Cooper Wyse looked down at Brando, who had curled up at his feet.

"Lucky thing Brando jumped in there when he did, huh?"

Bear scowled down at the dog and then remembered the Doberman biting into the Russian's forearm. The scowl turned into a grin as Bear leaned down to scratch behind Brando's ears.

"Good boy."

Outside, the landscape was passing by just a little more quickly as the train's speed had picked up to nearly thirty miles an hour.

On the opposite side of the passenger car, sitting alone, Mac winced in his seat as the pain in his lower back transformed from a throbbing whisper into a screaming attack. Without any doctor telling him so, he knew the cancer had spread from his lungs. He could almost feel the tumors multiplying inside his body.

Mac Walker was running out of time.

XXXI.

Dublin found the noise of the train soothing, making staying awake increasingly difficult as both the hours and the scenery outside passed by together. Reese sat next to her holding her hand, his head beginning to dip down toward his chest as sleep overtook him as well.

Mac had fallen asleep within the first hour of the train beginning its journey, his head resting against the glass of the window he sat next to. Dublin sensed the fatigue in Mac, and knew the others in the group did too. He was trying so

hard to hide how tired the trip was making him, but as the days wore on, that deception was proving even too difficult for the once incredibly strong and still proud, Mac Walker.

Bear and Cooper were sitting across from one another playing chess. The rancher shared how his former wife had taught him the game shortly after they first met. Cooper was never able to beat her, but over time, he had grown to appreciate the quiet intellectual challenge that a good chess match presented.

Dublin's mind wandered to the possibilities of what lay ahead of them.

The day they left Alaska, though recent, now felt so long ago. She wondered what would become of Imran and his life at Wilfrid. And of the godfather and his strange yet understandable obsession with living in the long ago world of the 1950's. Was the promised threat by those Muslim animals who killed that poor family, legitimate? Would a jihadist uprising wash over Wilfrid and then into Alaska?

Mac had told Dublin not to worry. Alaska had been notified and was prepared, though according to Mac, the far greater threat was the increasing drone sightings that were taking above the Alaskan skies. It was becoming

clear the New United Nations was preparing to re-establish its dominance over the newly freed state, thus making the purpose of their own mission to Churchill Manitoba that much more critical.

They had been on the train for nearly four hours, travelling for most of that time at nearly thirty miles an hour. Cooper had indicated earlier it would likely take about six hours for the train to reach Terrace.

Looking out her window, Dublin noted the ground outside was passing more slowly. The train was slowing down.

“Reese, we’re slowing down.”

Reese’s head snapped up as his eyes adjusted to the view outside the window.

“You’re right. Hey Coop – why’s the train slowing down?”

Cooper Wyse slowly took one of Bear’s chess pieces and then glanced out through the window across from him.

“Don’t know. Imagine we’ll find out soon enough.”

Mac had awoken and stood up, his right hand resting on the grip of his sidearm.

“We should still be at least an hour or two outside of Terrace, right?”

Cooper nodded as he continued to study the chess board.

Mac walked to the back of the passenger car to look out the windowed door to see what was behind him. There was nothing but the train tracks and the near barren and frozen landscape. Seeing Mac becoming nervous, Bear rose from his seat and began looking outside as well.

“What’s up Mac?”

Mac looked back at Bear briefly before returning his gaze to the outside.

“Not sure. Just don’t feel quite right, you know? Maybe...maybe the Russian is just taking precautions before travelling through Terrace?”

“One of us could go up to the front and ask him.”

Reese’s suggestion remained unanswered as Bear looked to the narrow wooden plank that ran along the passenger car’s exterior wall that was the path to the front of the train.

“You mean out there – while we’re still

moving?”

Reese was already moving to the back door of the passenger car.

“Sure. He said if we needed something to just walk to the front. I’ll go.”

Dublin grabbed Reese by his right arm and held him back from leaving through the door.

“Reese, we can just wait until we’re stopped. You don’t have to go out there.”

Reese smiled back at Dublin.

“Don’t worry, I’ll be fine. That way we don’t have to be waiting in here wondering what is going on. Be right back.”

Dublin and the others watched as Reese’s legs moved past the windows of the passenger car as he slowly made his way to the Russian at the front of the train. Though the train had slowed, Reese was surprised both at how strong and how cold the wind was that battered his body. He clung tightly to the steel hand rail that was just above his head on the upper portion of the passenger car while his feet shuffled sideways on the wood plank.

Behind the locomotive, there was a smaller trailer containing a large supply of coal. This trailer was hitched to the front of the passenger car, and Reese saw there was no plank to walk alongside the coal trailer. Instead, he would have to jump into the trailer itself, walk over the pile of coal, and then down into the locomotive where the Russian was driving the train.

Pausing to take a deep breath, Reese jumped from the plank into the back of the coal trailer, landing softly onto the dark pile of coal. Instantly, a cloud of dust rose up from his feet before settling onto his clothes. Each step he took over the coal pile created yet another small

cloud of coal dust. By the time he reached the other side of the trailer, both his winter boots and lower half of his pants were covered in the dust.

As his head rose up from the coal trailer to look into the back of the locomotive, Reese found himself staring directly into the eyes of the Russian glaring back at him.

“What do you want?”

Reese continued to pull himself out of the coal trailer before answering the question, which caused the Russian to merely repeat it with more volume.

“What do you want?”

The Russian was covered entirely in dark soot, the whites of his eyes the only place not inked in blackness. Behind him the considerable heat from the engine's coal-burning firebox washed over Reese, causing him to already begin sweating.

Losing patience, the Russian grabbed the front of Reese's jacket with one blackened hand and pulled him down in front of him.

“What do you want?”

Reese removed the Russian's hand from

his coat and used his thumb to motion behind him.

“We were wondering why you’re slowing the train down.”

The Russian nodded and then turned to point at a small metallic box with four red lights on top of it. One of the lights was blinking.

“Trouble. Something ahead of us on the track. That signal tells me if track is clear or not. Track is not clear. Two miles ahead, not clear. We stop, walk up, and find out why.”

Without waiting for Reese to respond to

the information, the Russian turned fully around and pulled back a lever that applied yet more brake pressure, causing the train's speed to slow even further. Within minutes, the train stopped completely.

The Russian jumped from the locomotive and began making his way to the back of the train as Reese followed him.

Mac and the others had already exited the passenger car and met the Russian halfway. Both Mac and Bear were holding drawn handguns. Cooper stood just behind them with Brando sitting at his side.

“Something blocking the track up ahead. Need to go see what it is. Could be trap. Could be nothing. Bring guns.”

Having given his reason for stopping, the Russian turned around and began walking back toward the front of the train as Mac nodded toward the passenger car.

“Get the rifles Bear, and an extra magazine for each one. Also make sure we all have our communicators in case we’re separated, and grab the sight scope too. We’ll follow this Russian down the track to see whatever is bothering him, but if things go to shit,

then we are on our own. You follow my lead - my orders. Understood?"

Everyone in the group nodded. Bear climbed back into the passenger car and then re-emerged a few minutes later carrying two M16 rifles they had taken with them from Cooper's arsenal back at his ranch. As Bear was stepping down from the passenger car, the Russian was returning to the group with his own AK-47 under his arm.

Mac shook his head and pointed to the Russian's rifle.

"Over the years I've heard so many people tell me the AK is the better

weapon. No way, no how. Slower shooting, less accurate, and not nearly as reliable as the word of mouth makes it out to be. I'll be carrying one of those American-made M16s, thank you very much."

The Russian looked down at his rifle and then over at Mac as he took one of the M16s from Bear.

"AK-47 a better gun. More powerful. Russian. You're holding a toy gun."

Cooper Wyse checked both of his Colt shooters, before returning them to their holsters.

“I’d just as soon not need to use any of them.”

The Russian looked back toward the train tracks and motioned for the others to follow him.

“Ok – let’s go.”

For twenty minutes the group walked slowly down the train tracks as the front of the locomotive disappeared behind them. There was no sign of anything amiss, but the farther the group walked, the more intensely Mac’s eyes stared out in front of them.

The Russian continued to appear almost

bored, his eyes looking down at his feet as he stepped along the dark, oil stained wood railroad ties that lay between the tracks.

Dublin was the first to point out potential trouble as her eyes caught a glint of something well in front of them. She could not tell if it was metallic, or glass, but her eyes definitely spotted it momentarily flashing before disappearing.

Mac had the group stop as he scanned the area trying to determine the best way to sneak up on whatever might be ahead of them. He took out the sight scope Bear had retrieved from the train and

used it to look down the tracks.

“Tracks bend to the left up ahead, so I can’t see farther than that. We’re going to go off the tracks here, walk along them on the right keeping our heads down. That way the rise in the ground where the tracks are will provide us at least a little cover and protection if we need it.

The Russian shook his head while continuing to walk down the center of the tracks.

“I don’t hide. I’ll go to see what is up there. You can come. You can stay here. I don’t care either way.”

Mac was about to object but then changed his mind. The Russian would likely divert the attention of whatever was up ahead, and allow them a great chance of sneaking up on them from another direction.

“Ok – let him go. We’ll do just like I said. Head down there, Keep to the right of the tracks, and see what’s what.”

The group walked no more than a hundred more yards before Mac began to cough repeatedly. He continued moving forward and waived the rest of the group on.

“Come on...keep going.”

Cooper Wyse put his hand on Mac's shoulder to get the older man to stop.

“You keep coughing like that Mac and everyone within a square mile will hear us coming.”

Mac's eyes flashed angrily before realizing Cooper was right.

“I know – just give me a second to catch my breath here. Can't seem to shake this cold, or whatever it is. I'll be fine.”

The group waited another minute and then Mac began walking again.

“Ok, I’m good. Let’s go.”

The top of the Russian’s head could be seen above the tracks as he casually walked in front of the group about forty yards ahead. He was whistling.

A shout issued from directly in front of the Russian. It was in Arabic. Mac cocked his head to the left and then told the others that whoever was up ahead on the tracks intended to take all goods from the train.

The Russian stopped and replied in his own native tongue, causing the Arabic voice to scream back angrily in

response. The Russian in turn replied in English.

“I don’t speak your fucking language. Speak English, or shut up and get off of my train tracks!”

Silence from the Arabic speaking voice followed the Russian’s words. This silence was then shattered as several rounds of gunfire rang out. Yakov felt a moment of pressure in the top portion of his left shoulder and looked down to see a small bullet hole having ripped through the exterior of his heavy wool jacket. This pressure was soon followed by a increasingly throbbing pain.

He had been shot.

“Ok. You want to play with guns? Yakov show you how to play with guns!”

The Russian aimed the AK-47 in front of him and fired several rounds back in the direction of the Arabic speaking voice. As he did that, Mac and the others sprinted forward on the left side of the train tracks, crouching down in the hopes of staying out of view. Mac hoped that the Russian was smart enough to not point his weapon in their direction.

Everyone in the group looked up in shock as the Russian raced by on the

train tracks above them, still firing his gun, a wide smile flashing beneath his massive beard as his long black and grey hair flew out behind him. Mac rolled his eyes at Yakov's overly aggressive attack.

“Damn Russians.”

A large explosion sounded no more than twenty yards behind the group. Everyone looked back to see the detonation rise up into the sky. Mac's jaw set as he motioned the group forward again.

“Grenade. The Russian is damn lucky they don't know how to throw.”

More back and forth rifle fire sounded in front of them. The Russian was jamming another magazine into his AK-47 as he glanced to his left and then waived his right arm forward.

“C’mon! We get those Muslim dogs!”

Bear, the tallest of the group, was able to spot at least eight men racing across the tracks just a hundred feet in front of them.

“Got at least eight in front of us Mac. All armed.” Another grenade blast detonated just on the other side of the tracks, sending debris landing on top of the heads of Mac and the others and

causing the Russian to jump and roll down to them from the top of the train tracks. He grimaced as he landed hard on his left shoulder.

Mac began to move forward again, the others all following. It appeared even Yakov had decided to defer to Mac's expertise. The voices of the Muslim bandits could be heard just on the others side of the tracks. Mac leaned down and whispered to the group.

“Yakov, Bear, and me will go ahead another hundred yards or so and then make our way back to their location, guns firing. Give us just five minutes. You sit here as quietly as possible. As

soon as you hear us shooting, you join in.”

Reese nodded silently as Cooper Wyse removed both of his Colt pistols from their holster. Dublin reached out to grab Mac’s forearm, telling him to be careful.

Mac’s group was no more than thirty feet ahead of where Reese, Dublin and Cooper waited when the third grenade went off directly between them. Mac, Bear, and Yakov were thrown forward and landed, unmoving. Reese felt himself carried backward, where he landed and then tried to roll over to his side, but his body refused his attempt. Cooper Wyse too was thrown

backwards, where he remained motionless. Dublin, who was just behind Reese when the grenade detonated, was thrown to the left. Her head ringing, she rolled over onto her hands and knees while trying to replace the breath that had been knocked from her lungs. Her vision blurred and she felt herself on the verge of passing out. A voice seemingly coming from a great distance away, shouted above her excitedly as she felt herself being lifted up. This calmed her, as she was certain it was likely Reese taking her to safety. Her damaged awareness, still clouded by the grenade's explosion, was unable to warn her she was being carried away by one of the Muslim bandits.

XXXII.

The Great Consulate was nervous. He was always nervous when his adviser stopped by for their regularly scheduled visit. Those visits used to be daily, then weekly, but now, thankfully, they came only once per month. Still, he would much rather they not come at all. He was too busy playing with his seeker in the killing room, and planning to burn the world for its ungrateful treatment of his legacy as a living and breathing god among the wretched creatures called the human race.

Only she had access to his private residence atop the New United Nations building in New York. She had placed him there years ago, soon after he was made Great Consulate. There he remained, and would remain, likely for the remainder of the world's existence, which he knew to be coming to an end shortly. It was his will – and after all, he was a god.

The entrance door chimed the adviser's arrival. He could hear her light steps as she made her way to his office - a large, ornately furnished room overlooking the New York skyline. The Great Consulate grabbed a handful of candy corns and

waited behind his desk as the smoke from his most recently lit cigarette drifted upwards to the ceiling.

Somehow the adviser had hardly aged in all the years since their mutual rise to power. The Great Consulate, though a god, knew his body both looked and felt older, and yet, she remained a relatively vibrant, older woman. She was in fact, nearly five years older than him. She was already in her eighties, and yet, somehow remained much the same as she appeared to him over three decades ago.

“Hello Great Consulate.”

Try as he might to conceal it, he cringed at the sound of her voice, as his stomach tightened in fear.

“Welcome Adviser. Please, sit down.”

She took one of the two large leather seats on the opposite side of his desk, placing her folded hands on his desk and leaning in to look at him with her withering, cold, dark eyes. Those eyes had always made him uncomfortable. They seemed to know his thoughts, his fears, his weakness.

“You have no weakness – you are a god!”

The voice had returned to him, bolstering the Great Consulate's confidence as he looked back at the adviser. A small smile crept across his thin, ashen face.

The adviser appeared to not like his smile, her eyes narrowing just slightly as they remained staring at him.

“Something amusing to you?”

The Great Consulate shook his head, panic again rising up inside of him.

“No. Please, continue with your update.”

She sat back in her chair, though her eyes remained fixated on him.

“Did you receive the notification of your status as Great Consulate Emeritus?”

The Great Consulate nodded slowly.

“I did.”

She waited for him to say more. He refused to do so, even as the rage of that notification reignited within him.

“You cannot trust her. She was the one who pushed the Consul to strip you of your authority.”

The voice was going against his adviser? Could it be true? Was she in fact responsible?

The adviser spoke again.

“It is effective immediately – has in fact been in effect for days already. You didn’t respond to my electronic message, so I wanted to confirm you knew your revised status in person. That is my purpose here today. I will continue to call you by your former title, but the Consul will not.”

The voice cried out inside of the Great Consulate’s mind.

“See! She was the one! This is her doing! She is a traitor to a god!”

The Great Consulate smiled back at the adviser, hoping he appeared calm and fully in control of his emotions.

“Did you offer any opposition to the Consul’s directive?”

The adviser shook her head.

“I did not.”

The Great Consulate leaned forward in his chair, his diseased, black-gummed smile growing wider.

“And why not?”

A corner of the adviser's upper lip curled downward slightly as she smelled something foul and realized the Great Consulate was urinating below his desk.

“It was the right decision for the New United Nations. The Saudis agreed. You have served us, and them, well. It is now time to move on. You should do the same. We will continue to provide for you of course. You can remain here at the residence if you choose, or another location can be set up as well.”

The Great Consulate's voice cried out a warning to him.

“She lies! They will kill you! She must not leave this place!”

Sensing some new danger in the Great Consulate’s eyes, the adviser stood up from the chair.

“We are already directing our drone program to prepare for the attack on Alaska to bring them back into compliance. The Saudis have also paid one of the Canadian warlords to strike at Juneau within days. They have been given significant weapons to accomplish this. It is our intention to make the Alaskans have to send all resources to Juneau to deal with the Muslim attack,

and then send in our drones from the west and north. Our military directors have estimated we will have defeated the Alaskan rebels within seventy two hours. The Texas Resistance is already fragmenting under our repeated drone bombings. We have pushed them down into Mexico, where the cartels will begin to attack them from the south as well. Soon this pathetic rebellion will be fully terminated, and the entire former United States will be brought back into full compliance of the mandates.”

The Great Consulate sat silently, processing the information the adviser had just presented to him. The voice was right – she had betrayed him.

“You speak as if you are now the Great Consulate. Are you?”

The adviser paused, and then shook her head.

“No, only acting Great Consulate until a formal vote can take place.”

The voice cried out again inside the Great Consulate’s mind.

“Kill her! Kill her now! She has defied a god!”

The Great Consulate rose from his chair, his body trembling with both the betrayal

of his adviser, and the fear of contemplating taking revenge. He had never acted against her, and the thought of doing so now panicked him.

She pointed a perfectly manicured finger at him.

“Sit down.”

The Great Consulate obeyed without thinking, his body complying with the request. He looked back up at the adviser as the fire of rage began to burn hotter within him. The adviser, thinking him having returned fully to his passive self, smiled back down at him.

“This truly is a new beginning for you. Don’t concern yourself with policies or politics. Devote your time fully to other interests.”

The Great Consulate slyly smiled back at her. Other interests? Oh yes, he had other interests. His beautiful children. His beloved seekers who were, at this very moment, catching up to those Dominatus animals. And the one in his killing room of course. That seeker remained alive...and very - very hungry.

Standing again, the Great Consulate nodded his head.

“Yes, it is for the best. You are right,

this will give me more time for my hobbies. I have a particular hobby. My seeker program. It has been doing very well, you know.”

The adviser nodded back at him as she took two slow steps backward toward the room’s entrance.

“Yes, I’ve seen the reports, though it was difficult to determine how many of those creatures have been created. The reports were inconclusive regarding that. I will have to receive more details soon.”

The Great Consulate giggled.

“Details – yes! I can show you them! More...details. Right now!”

He moved far more quickly toward her than the adviser would have thought possible. She panicked and took a too fast step backwards, the high heel of her left shoe buckling underneath her. The fall was all the Great Consulate needed to land on top of her, his hands circling around her neck and squeezing. She could smell his putrid breath as he struggled above her. A thin, discolored line of drool dropped from his mouth onto her face as his hands attempted to squeeze more tightly and choke the air from her lungs.

The voice was thrilled at the Great Consulate's attack on the adviser.

“Yes! Kill her! Do it! Do it! Do it!”

She continued to struggle underneath him, her hands clasping onto his wrists and pushing against them. The Great Consulate worried she was proving too strong for him, and already he was straining for breath. He determined he must squeeze her throat harder or else she would soon overpower him.

Finally, she began to weaken, her hands falling away from his wrists. The Great Consulate's one remaining lung wheezed loudly as he struggled to catch his

breath. Pushing himself back up from the floor, he grabbed another handful of candy corns, letting them dissolve in his mouth. Looking back down at the adviser, he saw her chest rising and falling slowly. She remained alive. He thought this a good thing. It would make for a warm meal, and a much more intense experience.

It was time to feed the seeker...

XXXIII.

Though still unable to move off the ground, Mac could hear the bandits

talking loudly to one another as they neared where the grenade had gone off. From what he could understand, the Russian had killed or wounded two of them. The loudest of the voices, likely the one in charge, began to talk excitedly about finding a woman. Other voices claimed to have found her first, but were silenced by the leader. He intended to take the woman with him back to camp where she would provide him entertainment for the night. Another voice argued that she should be shared with the rest after the leader was done with her, to which the leader agreed. Mac heard what sounded like two other men joining the leader to head back to their camp with Dublin, while the

remaining two bandits were ordered to stay behind and check if any in Mac's group had survived the blast. If so, those survivors were to be killed and their supplies stripped from them.

The leader and the other two bandits leaving were describing loudly and in great detail how they intended to rape Dublin over and over again.

Mac's mind screamed for him to move. His head ached with a loud ringing while his eyes were still unable to focus even a few feet in front of him. He managed to take a deep breath and push himself up onto his knees, though his vision remained unclear, leaving him

uncertain as to what was going on around him. He was fortunate to be crouching behind a small shrub that partially hid him from the direct view of the bandits who were standing on the train tracks just above Mac's position.

The two Muslim bandits who had been left behind to find and kill any survivors were no more than forty feet from Mac, kicking the unmoving body of the Russian, who had likely taken the worst of the grenade's detonation. Mac focused his eyes enough to make out one of the bandits leaning over Yakov's body and urinating on it, laughing to his partner who in turn was kicking at Bear, who remained lying face down in the

dirt.

Time was running out. The farther away the bandits took Dublin, the less likely were her chances for survival. Should he shoot the two bandits who were now just in front of where he hid behind the bush? Would that shooting alert the other bandits and then further endanger Dublin's safety? Mac's mind refused to focus. Normally he would have assessed the situation and acted quickly. Now, following the grenade blast, the ringing in his head was making such decisiveness increasingly difficult.

The Russian made that indecision a mute point. As the smirking Muslim stood

over Yakov, who had been lying on his back, the Russian reached up with his right hand and grabbed the bandit's genitals with the same force he had nearly choked the breath from Bear earlier. This was followed by a violent downward jerking motion that ripped those genitals from the body of the Muslim bandit, who in turned screamed out loudly in shock and pain.

The other bandit froze as he looked over to see his comrade clutching his groin with hands already soaked in his own blood. This pause was all the Russian needed to shoot the panicked bandit in the head, his body crumbling to the ground. The other bandit who remained

alive, though terribly injured, jumped on top of the Russian screaming, his teeth sinking into Yakov's right ear, ripping half of it off. The Russian turned his head sharply to allow him to look directly into the eyes of the Muslim bandit. Taking both of his hands and gripping the sides of the Muslim's head, Yakov began twisting the bandit's neck until his head was nearly turned completely backward.

Mac heard the unmistakable loud crack of a broken neck. The life within the bandit's eyes were already fading as the Russian tossed the body off of him. He appeared to not even notice his savaged right ear, even as blood ran down the

side of his face and onto his clothing.

Mac managed to rise unsteadily to his feet, fighting off a wave of nausea as he took two very slow steps toward Yakov, who was attempting to stand up as well. Mac reached the Russian and looked down to see the cause of Yakov's difficulty in standing. A jagged piece of rock was deeply imbedded in the Russian's lower left leg, just above the ankle – a result of the grenade explosion.

“Stay here Yakov. See if any of the others are still alive and help them out. I have to go get Dublin.”

The Russian shook his head.

“I help you. They will kill her if we do not reach her first.”

The Russian attempted to take a step on his injured leg and for the first time, Mac heard Yakov cry out in pain. Mac put his hands on the Russian's shoulder and pushed him gently back down onto the ground.

“Stay here. I'll be right back.”

Mac picked up the M16 he had been carrying prior to the grenade explosion, quickly looking over it to determine its condition. It appeared for the most part undamaged. Yakov's AK-47 on the

other hand, was missing its hand guard and had a large crack in its charging handle. It likely could no longer shoot. Even in the midst of the chaos following the grenade attack, this caused Mac to smile as he began running in the direction Dublin had been taken, following the path of the railroad tracks to guide him.

No more than a hundred yards later Mac found himself fighting to breath. So much so that he put his hands on his knees as another wave of dizziness overtook him. Mac began talking to himself as he struggled to continue moving forward.

“Fucking hell Mac – get it together.”

Another thirty yards of running left Mac stumbling onto his hands and knees, his lungs burning in protest. A series of violent coughs shook through Mac and he looked down to see blood splattered on the ground below him.

“Get up you asshole! You have to save Dublin!”

Mac rose to his feet again, and began running unsteadily down the train tracks, the landscape fading into a murky grey curtain in front of him as his eyes were again losing the ability to focus. And still Mac Walker pushed himself to

continue running after Dublin and the Muslim bandits who had taken her.

He managed to cover another forty yards before his legs buckled beneath him, causing Mac's face to crash into the ground between the railroad tracks. His breathing came in short, wheezing gasps before being interrupted by another series of violent coughs.

“NO! I am not dying now. Not yet. Move you old fucker! Get up and move!”

Mac's lips drew back into a snarl, the blood from his coughing lungs covering his teeth and gums.

Again he stood on his feet and began running to save Dublin.

This time Mac was only able to move ahead just a few yards more before he again collapsed onto the ground. Tears formed in the corners of his eyes as he began to realize his body would no longer obey his orders. Dublin was gone, and Mac was unable to save her.

“Fuck you God! If you exist, you are a worthless, conniving, uncaring pile of shit!”

Mac rolled onto his back, his eyes staring into the cloud covered sky above

him, his shallow, wheezing breath causing a misty fog to form just above his face.

The sound of running footsteps approaching from where Mac had just come from echoed around the former Navy SEAL. Mac attempted to sit up as he tried to aim the M16 in front of him. His vision re-focused enough for Mac to see Reese running as fast as possible toward him, as Brando gracefully sped alongside him as well.

A moment later, Reese knelt beside Mac, his eyes wide with alarm.

“Yakov said they got Dublin! Mac —

where is she?”

Mac handed the M16 to Reese.

“Keep following the tracks. You’ll get to them soon. Their camp has to be close. You got to hurry Reese – they’ll kill her. When they’re done with her... they’ll kill her.”

Reese stared back at Mac with an intensity the older man had not seen in him before. Nodding his head, Reese stood back up with the M16 cradled tightly under his right arm and began running down the tracks with Brando following beside him.

Looking desperately for any sign of the bandits and Dublin, Reese noticed Brando sprinting out in front of him and then coming to a stop near a group of large rocks jutting out from the ground. The Doberman remained silent, though his body language suggested he sensed the presence of others near where he stood.

Reese stopped running and walked as quietly as possible where Brando stood. The dog continued to stare intently at something just beyond the outcropping of rocks. Then he heard the sound of laughter.

Brando glanced back at Reese and then

walked silently to the rocks before looking back at Reese as if to ask why he wasn't following him. Reese in turn was surveying the surrounding area, and soon spotted the markings of recent tire tracks cutting through the dirt and pebbles, and disappearing in the direction he had just heard the laughter coming from.

Looking down at the M16 to ensure it was ready to go, Reese made his way to the rocks and began to move just left of them, and was soon able to spot the bandit camp. No more than forty feet beyond the rocks was a dilapidated military jeep parked next to a large, dirt covered tent. It was from inside of that

tent that the continued laughter issued from.

Brando issued a low, menacing growl before again looking up at Reese, who in turn was attempting to determine the best way to approach the tent without being seen or heard.

Dublin's scream cut through the air and into Reese's heart. Without thought, he found himself running directly into the bandit camp with the M16 pointed in front of him. Within seconds he stood just inside the tent entrance where he saw Dublin hanging naked from the ceiling, a single rope tied around both of her wrists. One of the bandits stood

behind her, his hands clutching at her breasts, while another stood directly in front of her and was in the act of removing his own clothing as his tongue crept along Dublin's right shoulder and neck.

Reese locked eyes with Dublin for a half second. She looked over to her right. There stood the third bandit some twenty feet from where the other two were preparing to rape her. This bandit was armed, and had followed Dublin's gaze to the tent entrance where Reese stood.

Both men raised their assault rifles and fired them simultaneously. The bandit shot wide, the bullets passing left and

high of Reese's position. Having spent hours working with Mac on improving his shooting in the two years following the bombing of Dominatus, Reese's aim proved far more accurate. While the first two bullets just grazed the arm of the bandit, the next two entered his chest and sent him flying backward, a single departing scream exiting his mouth as his body struck the ground.

The bandit standing directly in front of Dublin turned to look at Reese, his face shocked to see someone he had thought dead from the grenade blast so soon before. Reese hesitated to aim his weapon at the bandit, fearing he could hit Dublin. Sensing how her position

was compromising Reese's ability to shoot, Dublin lifted both of her feet from the ground and sent them flying into the bandit's back, sending the man flying forward and giving Reese the room he needed to fire the M16. Five rapid shots later, and the second of the three Muslims lay dead.

The last bandit, the one whose hands just seconds earlier were groping Dublin's breasts, remained behind Dublin, though now he had a blade held firmly to her throat with just enough pressure it left a thin streak of blood across her skin. Just a bit more pressure and the knife would easily cut through her skin, find an artery, leaving her to bleed out and die.

The Muslim bandit glared back at Reese. His face was housed in a dark, dirt encrusted beard above which a long, sharp nose protruded above his mouth. He had been the leader of the bandit camp, sent here by the Vancouver warlord to halt the Russian's train and take whatever was on board. His shirtless chest was covered in a layer of dark hair, the exposed skin as dirty as his beard. He attempted to speak to Reese in English.

“I cut her throat, make her bleed like pig. Put down gun, or she die now.”

Dublin took several deep breaths,

preparing for whatever move Reese would decide to take. Reese in turn tried to determine if he could shoot the M16 accurately enough to hit the bandit but not Dublin. He feared he would be unable to do so.

The hard, cold end of a rifle barrel jammed into the small of Reese's back. Another bandit, likely assigned to some guard position away from the camp, had returned, crept up behind Reese, and now threatened to shoot him if he didn't drop the M16.

Reese froze, knowing if he dropped the assault rifle, both he and Dublin would likely end up dead. Suddenly the

pressure of the rifle against his back disappeared as the form of Brando blurred past him. The Doberman, who had been lurking just outside the tent entrance, jumped into the Muslim bandit, the dog's teeth sinking deeply into the man's exposed throat. Without looking to see if Brando could handle the bandit on his own, Reese took several quick steps to his left, trying to get a better angle to shoot and kill the Muslim still threatening Dublin with the knife.

Dublin in turn took the moment of confusion and surprise caused by Brando's attack, snapped her head backwards into the bandit leader's face. A move familiar to what she had seen

Mac utilize when he was challenging Santos in Wilfrid.

The knife momentarily fell from Dublin's neck as the Muslim bandit cried out in pain and anger, cursing in Arabic as he took several steps back from where Dublin hung from her wrists that remained secured to the tent rafters. That space was more than enough for Reese. The first two bullets struck the bandit's right shoulder, spinning him around and causing him to collapse to the ground against the back wall of the tent. Reese moved forward and fired seven more rounds into the man's back. His eyes filled with rage over seeing what the Muslim had intended to do to

Dublin, Reese then placed the end of the assault rifle to the back of the man's head and fired three more rounds that ripped through the bandit's skull, sending bloody paste-like bone and brain fragments splattering against the tent wall like some macabre canvas of death.

Dropping the M16, Reese grabbed the bandit leader's knife and used it to cut Dublin down. Her clothes, just minutes earlier ripped from her body, were found on the ground in a corner of the tent. Dublin quickly dressed herself as Reese stood just outside trying to calm the still manic beating of his heart.

Every time he thought of what had been done...what would have been done, to Dublin, the rage re-ignited inside of him. He knew he had to calm himself to ensure he would be at his most efficient and useful to ensure both he and Dublin returned to Mac and the others. Reese knew Mac and the Russian remained alive. He didn't know the status of either Bear or Cooper Wyse.

Dublin stood next to Reese. For several seconds, neither of them spoke a word, before Reese finally turned to face her, looking down into her eyes as he gently placed his hands against both sides of her head.

“I would never let anyone harm you Dublin. Never.”

Dublin remained silent, looking back into Reese’s eyes. Then she gave him a small smile before hugging him tightly as she leaned up to whisper into his ear.

‘Right back at you.’

XXXIV.

Reese, Dublin and Brando sat in the rusted out military jeep. A small toggle taped to the right of the steering column was used to start the vehicle. Despite its

quite ragged outward appearance, the engine quickly fired up and idled smoothly.

Within a few minutes the three returned to where Reese had left Mac and the others when he ran off to save Dublin. Mac was standing alongside Bear, and though he looked weak, Reese was simply grateful to see the older man back on his feet and breathing with far less discomfort than when he had last seen him.

Bear looked as immovable as ever, the only indication of the grenade attack being a shallow scratch that ran from his forehead to the bridge of his nose. He

was agitated at not having recovered sooner from the grenade blast to have been able to assist Reese with going after the bandits who had taken Dublin.

“I’m sorry Reese, by the time I was sitting up you were already gone. Then I found Mac and wasn’t sure if I should stay and help him or head out after you. Looks like you did fine on your own though.”

Reese quickly outlined what had happened back at the bandit encampment – a story that left Mac smiling back at both him and Dublin. Mac was proud, knowing he had played a significant part in teaching both of them the skills

needed to protect themselves in a life and death situation. Today, that teaching proved successful.

Dublin's eyes scanned behind Mac and Bear, looking for Yakov and Cooper Wyse.

“Where are Cooper and Yakov? Are they both ok?”

Bear pointed back at where the train had been left a mile or so behind them.

“They both walked back to the train. Well, more like the Russian limped back with Cooper helping him. Yakov had this thing...a piece of rock that the

grenade blast had shot into his leg. Dumb asshole that he is, he just grabs onto it and yanks it out. Blood everywhere. So much that we all start thinking he's gonna bleed out right in front of us. So Cooper rips off part of his shirt and ties it tight around the leg, and they start heading back to the train where we have a med kit with our supplies. Cooper says he's stitched up plenty of animals before, so the Russian shouldn't be any different."

Reese was looking at Mac intently.

"And what about you Mac? How are you feeling?"

Mac's eyes fell to his feet momentarily before he looked back up at Reese.

“I'm ok Reese. Been better...but I'm ok.”

Reese decided now was not the time to push Mac on what was wrong with his health. That would have to happen soon – but after they were back on the train and traveling to Manitoba.

Right before they all got into the bandit's jeep to drive back to the Russian's train, Mac pointed some sixty or so yards in front of where they were standing.

“Good thing the Russian stopped the

train. The bandits had placed explosives on the track. Probably would have derailed the train. Apparently Yakov's got these motion detectors sitting all along this stretch of tracks – about seven miles worth. Anyone starts messing around on or near the tracks and his monitor inside the locomotive lets him know. He says this area has always been trouble for bandits because the terrain allows them easy access to the tracks. Once we get past here, that danger is quite a bit less, and then when we start heading back northeast, we'll be so isolated, there'll be almost no danger of bandits. Smooth sailing he said. When I pointed out we were on a train and not a sailboat, he told me to

fuck off - said that while blood was pouring out of his leg.

I'm really starting to like that Russian."

Just before Reese put the jeep into gear Mac used his handheld communicator to let Cooper know they were all headed back to the train.

The drive back to the train was brief, and upon arriving, Reese and the others found both Cooper and Yakov working to replenish the engine's firebox with coal. Actually, it was Cooper who was doing the shoveling as the Russian stood scowling, muttering under his breath how the rancher was shoveling, "too

slow – too slow”.

Seeing the others, Cooper offered them a big smile as he stepped from the locomotive and gave both Reese and Dublin a brief hug.

“Reese, I take it you killed the bandits who took Dublin?”

Reese gave a brief nod of his head.

“Yeah – I did. With Brando’s help. He tore out the throat of one of them.”

Cooper Wyse didn’t appear surprised at the mention of Brando’s recent heroics.

“Sounds about right. That dog can flat out fight if it’s needed. As for you Reese - well done. Did good.”

Yakov remained inside the locomotive, trying to shovel coal on one good leg. The other was wrapped tightly in white gauze.

Mac nodded in Yakov’s direction while addressing Cooper.

“Get him stitched up ok?”

Cooper shook his head as he glanced back in the Russian’s direction.

“Yeah – you could say that I suppose.

Got him back here, tied off the tourniquet a little more, and he grabs a bottle of vodka and pours it all over the wound. Must have hurt like a son-of-a-bitch. Drinks about a third of the bottle himself, and then tells me to heat up the backside of that same shovel he's using now to cauterize the wound. Says he doesn't like stitches. Calls them a waste of time. I hesitated cauterizing it — figure there's going to be a hell of a risk of infection. He starts cursing me out, calling me things I don't even understand, and grabs that shovel himself and pushes the back end of it right up against the wound on his leg. Holds it there for about ten seconds and all you can smell is his skin burning to

hell. Terrible smell. He looks down at it, pours some more vodka over it, wraps it up in gauze, and then goes back to shoveling coal like he doesn't have a care in the world.”

Yakov leaned out of the locomotive and nodded at Dublin and Reese.

“Kill the Muslims?”

Reese answered back.

“Yeah – we killed them.”

The Russian nodded his head once.

“Good. We go soon. Ten minutes. Be

ready.”

Cooper Wyse, himself known to be a man who would rather do than say, shook his head at the Russian's brevity.

As Bear rejoined the Russian in helping him shovel coal into the firebox, Mac and the others took their seats in the passenger car and waited for the train to start moving again. Ten minutes later, just as Yakov had told them, the train began to inch its way forward. It was at that very moment Brando's head raised and he bolted from his position at Cooper's feet to the back of the passenger car where he began to snarl and bark loudly.

Everyone else in the passenger car turned their head to follow Brando, wondering what could have the Doberman so agitated. Cooper rose from his seat and began to make his way to the back of the passenger car, his eyes straining to see whatever it was the dog was sensing behind them. The train's speed was slowly increasing to nearly ten miles an hour.

“What the hell is that?”

Cooper's question was barely heard above the din of the locomotive as it worked itself slowly down the train tracks, pulling the passenger car behind

it.

The others joined Cooper at the back of the train car, looking out the same small window as the rancher was. All of them inhaled sharply at the sight of the hellish nightmare that followed them. Even Mac Walker, who had seen countless horrors during his seventy five years of existence, was both stunned and frightened at the sight.

“Oh my god.”

XXXV.

Hundreds of dark shaped monsters moved quickly toward the train, running with an odd hunched gait where their heads hung well ahead of their bodies, and their claw fingered hands would push them forward in unison with their feet, similar to how a monkey would run. Their sleek, lean, hairless bodies were moving with considerable speed – much faster that the train was managing to travel at that time. Unless the train's speed increased more quickly, the creatures would likely catch up to them within another minute, possibly even sooner.

A particularly large seeker ran directly ahead of the others, its inhumanly wide

mouth growing wider as it let out a prolonged, terrifying shriek that was immediately joined by the many other seekers who answered its call with equally shrill shrieks of their own. Brando began to whimper, sensing the vast number of the monsters now nearing the slowly moving train.

Without uttering a word, Cooper Wyse opened the passenger car door and stepped to the small outside platform that hung off the back. Both of his Colt pistols were drawn, and he began to take aim, pause a half second before each shot, and then shoot. Each bullet found a target, eliciting a shrieking cry of pain from one of the creatures. Only a few

dropped to the ground though. Others, though hit by one of Cooper's bullets, continued running toward the train. It took no more than fifteen seconds for the rancher to fire off all six shots in each of his guns. He turned to look beside him as Reese, holding one of the assault rifles he had taken from the Muslim bandits, began firing repeated rounds into the dark mass of seekers.

In the front of the train, the Russian heard gunfire from behind the locomotive and stuck his head out the side and looked back to see the nightmare mass of creatures running to catch his train. Yakov turned around to look at Bear, who was steadily

shoveling yet more coal into the firebox, and uttered a single command to the big man.

“Shovel faster. Shovel more. Strange things behind us.”

Bear looked back at the Russian with a mixture of confusion and anger.

“What?”

His shouted question was ignored by Yakov, who was focused entirely on getting the train up to speed in a shorter time than he would normally have done.. Hoping enough steam was being produced without causing dangerous

levels of pressure to build inside the boiler and valves, the Russian released more water into the system while carefully monitoring the water level just above the firebox. Too much and the increase in the rate of speed would be too slow. Too little and the firebox temperatures quickly become dangerous.

Determining enough coal was in the firebox, Yakov held up a hand signaling Bear to pause his shoveling. The firebox was closed entirely, causing the water temperatures to spike upward. Normally this process would have taken nearly thirty minutes. Now the Russian was attempting to compress it into no more than ten minutes.

The train's valves groaned under the strain, as massive clouds of coal ash belched from the exhaust chimney. The speed indicator currently showed just twelve miles an hour.

Reese quickly emptied the AK-47's standard 30-round magazine into the seekers. He was able to see at least three of them collapse onto the ground and not get back up. Hundreds more were still closing in on the train, their collective shrieks close enough to overpower even the noise of the moving train. Reese was about to return to the inside of the passenger car to get another magazine but Mac was already stepping

onto the platform with his trusted M16. His skin color remained a pasty white, while his breathing continued to be a series of short, raspy, wheezing noises, but the former Navy SEAL had that look of calm determination Reese had become so familiar with seeing on Mac's face during an imminent threat.

“Not bad Reese. You're getting better. Let's see what I can do.”

Like the AK-47, the M16 used a thirty round magazine. Mac had modified its firing mechanism though to make it capable of shooting even faster than the standard design. Using the platform railing as a brace his arms against, Mac

aimed the M16 into the center of the seekers and began firing with such speed, the entire magazine was emptied within a few seconds. Before Reese could utter a response, the seventy five year old had slammed another magazine into the rifle and began firing again. This was repeated a third time, and then a fourth. At least thirty of the creatures were no longer running toward them. Still hundreds remained and the seekers nearest the back of the train were now no more than fifty yards away from where Mac stood on the platform.

The Russian glanced down at his speed indicator as he heard the unmistakable sound of a fully automatic assault rifle

firing from the back of the train. He grunted his approval as he imagined the amount of ammunition that was blasting into the dark mass of monsters trying to catch them. The speed of the train was now eighteen miles an hour, and yet, looking back, the seekers were still gaining ground – though not quite as quickly as before. Yakov was giving Mac and the others just a little more time to try and stop them.

“More coal.”

Bear quickly complied with the Russian's order. He had heard the shrieking noises, recognized those shrieks as the things in the woods that

had been chasing them before, and knew there were many more of the monsters, whatever they were, now coming after them.

Mac had emptied every one of his loaded magazines. Dublin was next, holding one of the simple hunting rifles Cooper had strapped to each of the horses when they first left his ranch on their way into Canada. Like Mac, she used the platform railing to stabilize her arms, took aim, and began firing a slow, steady stream of bullets into the seekers, though the hunting rifle only held six rounds. Dublin's aim proved exceptional though — four seekers dropped to the ground.

“We’ve killed at least forty, maybe fifty of them – but there’s so many left. And they just keep coming. We don’t have enough ammo to kill them all.”

Mac’s tone indicated he was growing concerned, which in turn made Reese and the others even more so. The seekers would be on the train in moments if something wasn’t done to stop them.

“What about those detonation devices the Russian found on the tracks? The ones the bandits were going to use to stop the train? Didn’t he disarm them and put them in here somewhere?”

Mac's eyes widened at Cooper's comment.

“Where are they?”

Cooper Wyse walked to the front of the passenger car and took out a small bag and brought it back to Mac. Inside the bag were two small plastic cylinders, not more than eight inches long. Each had a detonator that had been wired into one of the ends of each cylinder, but the Russian had already removed those.

“No detonators – how would we get them to work?”

Mac held one of the cylinders in his hand and turned it over several times, then held it up to his nose to smell it.

“I’m pretty sure this is some kind of Amatol device. Old school stuff. Like a syrup inside of there. We could drop it onto the tracks behind us and then shoot at it. That should be enough impact force to cause detonation.”

Reese had picked up the second cylinder.

“Would throwing it be enough to get it to explode?”

Mac shook his head.

“No, this stuff isn’t that volatile. Makes it much safer to transport. Although if it’s been sitting for a while, that theory might not hold up as well. It smells newer though. They used plastic for the casing because it won’t vibrate like a metallic casing. Makes it even safer. Also going to make it tougher to detonate though without the charge.”

Brando began growling again as one of the seekers ran toward them just twenty feet behind the train, its black eyes staring back at Mac and the others as they looked over the explosive devices. Dublin, holding her handgun, calmly pointed it at the creature and fired two

shots into its body. As the monster collapsed and rolled onto the compacted dirt and stone between the train tracks, it was replaced by several more that were just behind the one Dublin shot. The things let out a prolonged and angry shriek, the claws of their hands digging into the dirt and stones between the tracks as they propelled themselves forward with even more determination. Dublin fired several more times until she emptied her gun. For every seeker that fell, it seemed three more were behind it.

Mac turned back onto the platform at the rear of the passenger car with one of the cylinders in his right hand. Cooper, who

had just reloaded both of his Colt pistols, took a position next to Mac, ready to detonate the device once Mac had thrown it.

“We need to wait until those things are almost on top of us!”

Cooper said nothing back to Mac, but simply nodded his agreement. Behind both of them, Brando continued to growl with increasing menace at the growing number of seekers who were closing the gap between them and the back of the train. Nearly thirty of the things were close enough that both Mac and Cooper could note the rows of thin, sharp teeth that were exposed inside of the overly

wide, open mouths of the creatures. They could hear the odd clicks and shrieks the things were using to communicate with one another. They could see the sinewy cords of muscle flexing with each bounding motion forward of their arms and legs, and hear as the things' hands and feet hit the ground and vaulted them forward with considerable speed.

Looking back over the group of seekers nearest the back of the train, Mac saw a black writhing mass following behind them. There were at least three hundred seekers left chasing them – possibly more.

“Ok Coop – I’m gonna drop this thing on a three count. You need to hit it as soon as it touches the ground. Any hesitation and those things will be running over it and you won’t be able to see it. Understand?”

Again Cooper Wyse spoke no words in response to Mac, but merely nodded his head.

Mac gave the countdown and dropped the explosive just a few feet behind the moving train. A half second later Cooper fired his pistol.

Nothing happened.

His face wincing slightly after realizing he had missed, the rancher had just enough time to get off one more shot before the seeker's bodies would cover the small plastic cylinder that lay in between the tracks. Closing his left eye and looking down at his target with his open right eye, Cooper Wyse held his breath, focused on keeping his right hand absolutely still, and squeezed the trigger.

The explosion, just forty feet behind the moving train, created enough force to push both Cooper and Mac back a few steps against the outside wall of the passenger car. Several seekers were thrown into the air, their bodies ripped apart by the power of the detonation. A

temporary cloud of dust and dirt was created, making it difficult to determine how many of the seekers were actually killed – or how many remained chasing after the train.

Mac and the others looked silently behind them, waiting to be able to see how effective the blast had been in stopping the seekers' pursuit of them. Before the dust cloud fully dissipated, a throng of seekers ran through it, their mouths spread open, teeth exposed, and eyes filled with rage. Whatever emotion the seekers were capable of, fear was apparently not among them.

Cooper held up two fingers to Mac,

indicating it was time to throw the second explosive cylinder. As he did so, one of the seekers managed to lunge forward, its clawed hand gripping the bottom of the platform railing. Both Mac and Cooper found themselves staring into the eyes of the creature as it too hesitated while glaring back at them. The thing emitted a foul stench, like curdled milk that had sat out in the sun for many days.

Mac took his right foot and slammed it against the creature's fingers, trying to force it to let go of the railing. The seeker hissed menacingly back at him as it pulled the rest of its hairless, mottled gray body onto the lower portion of the

platform, its long-clawed toes curling around the bottom railing.

Cooper prepared to shoot the thing, but just as he raised his gun to the creature's head, Brando lunged forward from the passenger car and snapped his jaws shut just inches from the seeker's face. The thing responded to Brando's attack by reaching through the railing and grabbing the Doberman's neck, its claws sinking into the dog's flesh. Crying out with a sharp yelp that was more anger than pain, Brando lunged forward again, this time closing his jaws over the face of the seeker, one of his long canine teeth sinking deeply into the creature's right eye. The effect was immediate as the

seeker released its grip on Brando's neck and unleashed a high pitched howling shriek of pain as it fell from the platform, landing on its back against the tracks below, where it was almost instantly buried beneath the mass of other seekers that continued to follow the train.

Mac dropped the second cylinder behind the now faster moving train and both he and Cooper watched as Cooper's aim proved true. The explosion again ripped through the dark mass of creatures. The hundreds of seekers that still remained alive paused in their pursuit, stopping alongside the tracks as they stood on their legs and raised their noses into the

air, their heads bobbing up and down excitedly. Again their mouths opened wide to emit a collective, loud, piercing shriek.

The Russian smiled as he heard the second blast go off behind the train, knowing Mac and the others had been smart enough to use the explosives the Muslim bandits had intended to use to stop his train. Now they were being used to kill whatever monsters those things were coming after them. Bear was leaning out the other side of the locomotive, trying to see the damage inflicted on the seekers by the second explosion. Unable to see well enough behind the train, he turned back around

to look out in front of them.

“We got more in front of us.”

Yakov had already spotted what Bear had just seen. No more than three hundred yards further up on the tracks was yet another mass of seekers running directly toward them with seemingly no concern over hurtling themselves at the quickly approaching train.

The Russian grinned as his right hand reached down to pull back a small brass lever that was just below the locomotive's main control panel. He then opened up the steam dome valve which in turn propelled the train forward

even faster. They were now travelling at just over thirty miles an hour.

Bear watched silently as the Russian's eyes glinted in anticipation of what he had planned for the seekers who thought to slow or stall the train's movement by attacking it from both the front and the back. The gap between the creatures and the thick plated iron face of the locomotive was less than a hundred yards. Yakov began to loudly and with considerable enthusiasm, shout in his halting English a verse from an old 19th Century Russian folk song titled "Dark Eyes", his hands slashing up and down to the words as his train hurtled toward the running mass of seekers.

*Oh, not for nothing are you
darker than the deep!*

*I see mourning for my soul in
you!*

*I see a triumphant flame in
you!*

XXXVI.

Bear's eyes grew wide as he watched the long arc of flame shoot out from the Ronson system the Russian had installed

at the front of his train. The first seekers to be hit by the stream of hot fire were blown from the track where the outer layer of their bodies literally melted away. The next wave of seekers were pummeled both by fire and the still accelerating train, their bodies slamming into the train's front and then ground up by the massive churning train wheels underneath.

The smell of the creatures' burning flesh was almost unbearable, causing Bear to fight from vomiting. Yakov merely laughed as seeker after seeker slammed into the train, either burned, crushed, or often both.

“Smells like burning shit, huh? Probably tastes like it too!”

The flame thrower sent another blast of fire into yet more seekers. Apparently undeterred by how many of them were being killed, they continued to throw themselves at the train, their shrieking howls growing more intense. One of the creatures managed to cling to the front right side of the locomotive, its black eyes glaring back at Bear and the Russian as its body flexed and tensed in preparation of leaping forward into the cab where Yakov and Bear stood looking back at the thing.

The Russian's eyes caught movement

just to his left. Another seeker was able to grasp onto the outside of the locomotive and was quickly working its way toward him. It took no more than a second for the thing to make a final leap into the cab, its clawed fingers grasping at the front of Yakov's winter coat. The Russian fell backward into a corner of the cab, losing his footing as the creature fell on top of him, its wide mouth hissing as it attempted to snap its jaws around Yakov's face.

Bear grabbed one of the shovels used to feed the firebox and swung it at the seeker's head, only landing a glancing blow as the thing managed to duck right before being hit. The distraction

allowed the Russian the opportunity to lock both of his hands around the monster's sinewy throat as he pushed himself back onto his feet. Yakov's incredibly strong fingers squeezed tightly, his large thumbs pressing deeply just below the seeker's jaw until he was rewarded with the sound of the thing's windpipe crunching beneath his thumbs.

The seeker in Yakov's grasp made one last desperate attempt to free itself, snapping its jaws just inches from the Russian's nose. Ignoring the threat, Yakov continued to push his thumbs further into the thing's throat, snapping more bone and cartilage just before throwing the creature out the side of the

cab.

Bear was about to give the Russian a congratulatory shout of approval but instead found himself catching in midair the leaping seeker that had moments earlier been clinging to the right side of the locomotive. Bear swung the creature's body down against the thick iron floor of the cab with such force it left a small indentation. The seeker's head slammed backward, temporarily stunning it as its dark eyes rolled upward into its skull. This allowed Bear the second he needed to lift his booted right foot and send it crashing into the thing's chest, snapping its ribcage apart and impaling a fractured

rib directly into the seeker's heart, killing it instantly. Sensing the thing was dead, Bear took the same foot he had just crushed the seeker's chest with and pushed it out of the cab where its body rolled against the tracks and was crushed below the moving train.

Looking over Bear's work, Yakov simply nodded. The train was now travelling at nearly forty miles an hour. No more seekers could be seen in front of them.

Mac, Reese, Dublin, and Cooper looked back at the dark forms that were falling from view behind the passenger car. Mac was attempting to estimate how

many of the things were left alive, knowing the seekers would continue to stalk them all the way to Manitoba if able to do so.

“I’m guessing about a hundred and fifty of those things are left, at least from the ones we saw today. We blew through at least two-thirds of our ammo dealing with them. Another attack like that...we just don’t have the firepower to handle it.”

Cooper was already reloading his two Colt revolvers as Mac spoke.

“I’m down to eighteen rounds. Guess that means I better make them count,

huh?”

Reese and Dublin were inventorying the other weapons and ammo that still remained - ten shotgun shells and just enough rounds to refill one assault rifle magazine. Mac, Reese, and Dublin's handguns were already empty, and no more ammunition for those, or any of the other weapons was left.

Mac covered his mouth as he shook with another series of violent coughs. Dublin stepped toward him but he shook his head several times and waived her away.

“I'm fine. More worried about our

chances of being able to defend ourselves. If we run into any more trouble...”

Mac’s words remained hanging between the others as all of them turned to look through the windowed door at the back of the passenger car. The light outside was already diminishing. Soon, it would be dark.

Cooper noted the train was travelling southeast, as more trees began to dot the landscape outside. Their speed continued to increase.

“We’re definitely making good time. Figure we must be travelling at almost

fifty miles an hour now. Those things back there are fast, but not this fast.”

Mac eased himself back into his window seat, trying to hide yet another shot of pain that coursed through his lower back as he did so. Despite this pain, as soon as he was seated, he could feel sleep already working to overtake him. Mere minutes later, and his head dropped to his chest and the sound of his increasingly labored breathing mixed with that of the train wheels moving over the tracks below the passenger car. Brando walked over to where Mac sat, paused to briefly sniff the older man's sleeping form, and then lay down next to him, the dog's head setting down gently

atop Mac's feet.

Cooper carefully watched the attention Brando was giving to Mac, before turning to Reese and Dublin and whispering to them.

“Whatever it is Mac is suffering from, it's got him in a real bad way. What you saw Brando do right there, reminds me of this old cat that would show up at the ranch every few weeks. Tough thing, big white and black long haired Tom, always looking like it had just gotten into a scrape with another cat, raccoon, whatever – ears all torn up. It would hang out around the porch for a day or two, eat a few scraps of food I'd give it,

before setting out to wherever it would go. Well, it had that routine for a few years. Brando didn't pay it much attention. Guess he sensed I had kind of adopted it as a part time resident or something.

Last summer though, the cat just kept hanging around the porch. He would lay there curled up for hours at a time. I finally picked it up to look it over and noticed how much weight it had lost. No sign of trauma, but it just didn't want to eat. Then it didn't want to drink. With cats like that, it can be feline leukemia, basic renal failure, any number of things. The end result though, is the cat don't get better, right? They just...die.

Well, after I set it down, Brando walks up and sniffs at it, then lays right down next to it with the end his nose nudged up against the cat's body. I go back and get Brando to leave the cat alone, have him follow me out to the barn, and then kind of forget all about it.

Later in the day, I'm heading into the house for some lunch and there's Brando lying down next to that cat on the porch again. So I go over and tell him to get into the house. He's a good dog, he listens, and that's what he does, but inside the house, I can tell he's agitated. He's not barking or anything, just a nervous tension. When you're around an animal for a while, you can sense when

something's bothering them, and I could tell, Brando was bothered by having to be inside the house. Normally, that's not the case. Wherever I'm at, he wants to be. Not that day though. So I let him back outside and he goes right over to the cat, sniffs at it again, and then lays right down next to it. By the time its dark I go out to see if Brando wants back inside. Nope. He stays next to the cat, who by then, I could tell was having a lot of trouble breathing.

Next morning, Brando is at the door wanting in and the cat is curled up where I saw it the last time, but it's dead. And at that point, Brando didn't seem to even notice it there. He came in the house and

waited for me to give him breakfast like he didn't have a care in the world.”

Cooper Wyse paused for a moment, his eyes looking over at Mac sleeping as Brando lay down at his feet.

“Thing is, I figure Brando had some need in him to be there for that cat in the last moments of its life. The cat didn't have anybody else. It was old, had lived a long, hard life full of all kinds of cat related adventure, and now that life was coming to an end. Brando could smell the death on it, knew the cat didn't have long to live, and for whatever reason, he just wanted to be there for it when it happened. That might sound crazy, like

I'm giving a dog way too much credit, but I'm telling you, that is what Brando was doing. He was helping that cat, in some unspoken way that animals have, he was helping that old cat come to terms with dying. He was comforting it."

Dublin looked at Cooper and then back to Mac, trying hard to stop her eyes from tearing up.

"And that's what you think Brando senses with Mac? That he's dying? He's trying to...to comfort him?"

Cooper slowly nodded.

“Yeah, that’s exactly what Brando’s doing. I noticed it the first day Mac arrived at the ranch, how Brando seemed to be watching over him.”

Reese put his arm around Dublin and drew her close, sensing her growing sadness and how hard she was fighting not to break down completely.

“So what do we do? We can’t turn back.”

Cooper gave Reese a slight smile.

“No, we can’t turn back. Frankly, I wouldn’t even consider it. You two know Mac about as well as anybody.

He strikes me as the kind of fella who wants to be contributing something right to the very end, right?”

Dublin nodded as she put a hand over her mouth to muffle a sob.

“So I figure we keep letting the old dog have his days, however many he’s got left. That’s what would make him happiest. And when the time comes, and I’m pretty sure it’s coming sooner than later, we learn from Brando’s example. We make sure we’re there for Mac at the end. That’s not such a bad thing after all, to be leaving this world with others you care about watching over you, comforting you, reminding you that

you're loved. A lot worse ways to go out than that. A lot worse..."

XXXVII.

"That Libya situation was a real shit-hole Mac. We never should have taken that assignment. That place was never right from the moment we arrived. We give CIA the coordinates on Gaddafi and an hour later they are lighting up his caravan? It was supposed to be a locate and capture. Not an assassination. Did you see how many of ours were in that crowd? The ones who shot Gadaffi? That thing was staged.

That was a team who caught him. One of ours who killed him.”

Mac looked back at Benny with confusion. What the hell was he doing here? And why was he talking about Libya? That was almost thirty years ago. Actually, Benny was dead. All of them were dead. Except for Mac.

“Benny – you’re dead. This must be a dream because you died years ago. After I went to prison. Before Dominatus. Way before now.”

The tall black man who had been an integral part of Mac’s off the books military team shook his head and

laughed at Mac's remark.

“Good old Mac, some things never change. Always trying to stay in the here and now. I don't have to do that anymore. I'm living in the then and when. Catch my drift?”

Mac looked away from Benny and realized he was in fact standing in their former safe house just outside Benghazi proper. An upscale, off white, two story building that had a much larger lower level basement from which they had been working from for nearly three weeks – three weeks marked by increasing tribal violence throughout the northern half of Libya and pleas from

those left in the Gadaffi regime that they were willing to turn themselves over to the United Nations authorities.

Wait – the events in Benghazi really happened, but I never had this particular conversation with Benny. This can't be real.

Somehow Benny heard Mac's own thoughts, causing him to break out in laughter again. Benny always seemed to be in a good mood, even during some seriously dangerous situations. It made the fact the report of his suicide upon his return to the States that much more unbelievable. They had killed Benny as sure as they killed the others and

imprisoned Mac.

We simply knew too much and what we knew made us not worth the risk. We had outgrown our usefulness to them.

“You got that right, we knew too damn much. As for this conversation, you’re right Mac. We never had it back then in Benghazi. We had others. I bet you remember Jack warning us how bad things were getting. The NSA surveillance of everyone from Senators to the little old lady next door. The odd behavior in the White House. All the cover ups, the lies, how afraid everyone was getting. Couldn’t trust nobody no more. Not CIA. Not military. We were

fucked from the get go when we took that job. Day one, man. Day one.”

“Why are you here Benny? This is some dream, right?”

Benny walked up to Mac and hugged him. Hugged him tight. Mac was surprised how real it felt. Surprised too how he found himself hugging Benny back.

“This is as real as it needs to be Mac. Call it a dream, call it a vision, call it the here and now. It’s all those things and anything else you need it to be.”

Benny looked just as he did the last time

Mac had seen him alive. Tall, strong, a round kind face with deep set dark eyes, his slightly receding closely shaved hairline sitting atop his brown, smooth forehead. Like Mac, Benjamin Williams had spent years honing his skills in the American military, and then later, as a hired gun for the U.S. government – actions people like them simply called “off the books” operations.

“So did you kill yourself Benny? Like they said?”

Benny’s face flashed anger – a rare occurrence.

“Hell no, Mac. You know me better

than that. They were in my house when I got home. A little needle in the back of my neck and I was immobilized. Still conscious, but couldn't move."

"They got you with a paralytic."

Benny nodded back to Mac.

"That's right. We used that stuff a little ourselves didn't we? In fact, the whole thing went down just like we would have done it. They sat me down in my own chair, in my own kitchen, already had a suicide note ready to go that looked like my own handwriting. Placed the gun in my hand, put it to my head, and pulled the trigger. Murder by

suicide.”

Mac looked back at Benny, noting how calm the man was even when describing how he had been killed.

“How’d they get past the toxicology? Avoid traces of the paralytic coming up in the report?”

Benny put a finger to the side of his forehead and tapped it lightly.

“Think Mac. What did they have us do right before we were sent off to Libya?”

A light went on in Mac’s head.

“The physicals. They drew blood. Everything.”

Benny was nodding.

“That’s right – they already had the report ready. Had a kill option for each of us if we learned too much. We always thought we were so smart. Thing is, we underestimated just how evil the people whose checks we were cashing really were. How easily they were ready to kill off their own. So they manufactured an entire autopsy report, had one of their own sign off on it, had me cremated, and that was that. The investigation was opened and quickly closed. I killed myself. That’s what

they said, what the report said, and nobody with any kind of authority even thought to question it. I know you did... but by then, you were already in as much danger as I was.”

Mac had carried a deep guilt over the loss of his team, always wondering if he could have found a way to protect them.

“I couldn’t protect you Benny. You, Jack, Minnick, I should have done something. It was my job – protecting you.”

Benny smiled back at Mac.

“You always thought you could save

everyone didn't you? None of us went into that world blind. We all made a choice. We were paid and paid well, knew the risks. Don't bother with guilt...or regret. Life's too short Mac. You've done well for yourself since then. More importantly – you've done well for a lot of other people. All those years you helped protect them in Dominatus. All those lives you saved. And you're doing it again Mac. One last time. Finish this mission. You're close. So close.”

Mac looked down at the desert sands outside the Benghazi safe house, doubt creeping into his mind once again.

“I’m too old Benny. Too sick. Too tired. You know, I’ve never really been right since Benghazi. The whole thing changed for me back then. Our own government running those weapons – the dirty bombs. How they killed off that ambassador. I still can’t believe we had fallen so far. That the people put in power individuals so willing to sacrifice so many, just to consolidate their own power. That’s the part I just can’t understand. The goddamn motivation to do such a thing.”

Benjamin Williams placed a hand on each of Mac’s shoulders and gently squeezed them.

“You can’t understand evil Mac. No matter how you might try, evil is just too incomprehensible. People like us, we thought we were fighting for the good guys. Hell, we thought we were the good guys. And when that all gets turned upside down, it doesn’t make much sense. I get that. You are one of the good guys though, Mac. And this thing you’re doing right now...this trip to the priest in Churchill, it can change the world. Do you realize that Mac? The weapon is real. It exists and it’s there waiting for someone to put it into action. You can take back some of what was lost here in Benghazi all those years ago.”

Mac stepped away from Benny and looked up into the bright blue Libyan sky above him.

“You’re just my own mind talking to me Benny. You’re not here. This isn’t real. Maybe the priest is real, the weapon. I’m willing to try and find out, but you’re just my own guilt talking back to me. You’re gone, dead. A long time ago...”

Mac looked down to find Benny gone. He stood alone outside the Benghazi safe house. Half hidden in the sand next to his feet was a scrap of weathered paper that moved slightly as a warm breeze blew across the open desert.

This isn't real. None of this is real. Benny is dead. They're all...dead. And soon I'll be dead too and that will be that. No God. No afterlife. Just... nothing.

Mac's mind continued to replay that thought as he leaned over to pick up the scrap of paper. Its surface was slightly rough, weathered, and on it he found a brief, handwritten message:

The beginning of the new beginning

Mac instantly recognized the words. They were the very words inscribed on the grave of the Old Man just outside his cabin in Dominatus. The words

Alexander David Meyer had used to describe the events of the attack on Dominatus, when he believed that attack and their successful defense of Dominatus would initiate a second revolution throughout the United States. The Old Man had been right, to a degree. Many did rise up against the New United Nations, though not so many to ensure a clear victory, a victory that now appeared as uncertain as ever.

Peering more closely at the message, Mac found himself smiling at what he saw.

Not only were the words written down those of the Old Man, so too was the

handwriting...

XXXVIII.

The Great Consulate had to stop. He could feel his heart pounding inside of his chest as he leaned against the cool wall of his residence. Below his feet lay the body of the adviser – the body he had spent the last twenty minutes slowly pulling across the floor toward the entrance to his killing room where a very hungry seeker awaited.

The effort to move her to that entrance was proving more difficult than the

Great Consulate had anticipated. He hadn't believed it possible for her to be so heavy, or himself so weak. Perhaps a bit of rest was needed. Another cigarette and some candy corn to replenish his strength. Yes...that was a good idea.

Walking back to the main room, the Great Consulate sat in his favorite chair facing the massive window that overlooked Manhattan, where he could trace the slow paths of the multiple drones that flew over the heads of the millions below who resided in New York. Next to that seat he always made certain to keep a carton of cigarettes and a glass bowl filled with his beloved

candy corns.

For nearly an hour the Great Consulate sat smoking cigarette after cigarette while slowly sucking the sugary sweetness of the Candy Corns as they dissolved against his blackened gums. His one remaining lung sucked in the wondrous nicotine infused smoke of the cigarettes that he had especially made for him. Each deep breath helped to calm the Great Consulate, relax his mind, and allow him to more capably form required strategies.

There was a faint sound behind him. Something was moving in the residence.

Rising from his chair, the Great Consulate turned to see the adviser walking toward him, her eyes appearing to glow in the constant dim lighting of the main room. She didn't appear pleased with him as her right hand slowly massaged the area around her neck – the very neck the Great Consulate had so recently thought to have squeezed the life from her.

“All of my years of service to you, all of my efforts, the investments, the counsel, and THIS is how you repay me? You would kill me with your own pathetic, putrid, filthy hands?”

Her voice was venom. Fear welled up

within the Great Consulate. Fear, and regret for what he had attempted to do to her. It had been foolish. Rash. Not at all well thought out. It had been the voice that had told him to do it. The same voice that was now so strangely silent.

“What were you going to do with me? Feed me to that disgusting pet you’re keeping in that room of yours? Really? You know, that program, the seeker program, you have access to that only because I have allowed it. ME. Do you understand? All of the resources, all the time, all the aborted fetuses that have been used for its development...all of that happened because I convinced the

Consulate to allow it. And it can be taken away from you JUST LIKE THAT. The only reason it has been continued is because it actually has purpose. It has a viable, operative purpose to our surveillance program. In fact, those seekers are, and have been for some time, considered more valuable to the government than you are. Do you understand?”

The Great Consulate rose up to his full height, his jaw jutting out defiantly as he had done so often years ago when the world willingly bowed at his feet.

“The seekers are mine, and mine alone.”

The adviser laughed shrilly, then suddenly stopped as she jabbed a finger at him.

“You have NOTHING that is not given to you by me. And I only give what the Saudis and others deem acceptable. The seeker program was developed with New United Nations funding. The seekers’ movements are closely monitored by our surveillance teams across the country. You have no claim to them, just as you have no claim to anything. Everything, including yourself, is government property.

You may stay here, for now. Live in this filth. I will continue to see your

cigarettes and your candy corns and your human toys delivered per your requests just as I have always done for you all of these years. Know this though, the time is coming when I will have you removed from this place. Your existence is proving increasingly tedious. You long ago became a burden to us rather than the asset you once were. That change has been your doing. Continue to monitor the seekers yourself, if you find some entertainment in that. That is no concern of mine. What is my concern is destroying the rebellion in Texas and elsewhere. As I told you earlier, the Muslims are already preparing to attack Alaska. That is mere days away. First they will take out that pathetic outpost

called Wilfrid. From there we drone bomb Juneau and let the Muslims sweep across every city and town and do with them what they will. Within days the Alaskans will be begging for us to save them.”

The Great Consulate looked outside at a drone passing directly in front of his window.

“And what about the Dominatus survivors? The ones who left Alaska?”

The adviser smirked, her eyes also following the path of the nearby drone.

“I’m certain they think they have some

plan. Perhaps another silly radio message? Or maybe they are simply escaping to somewhere else they think themselves safe. It's not a priority, merely an annoyance, as they have always been to us."

It was the Great Consulate's turn to smirk as his heavy lidded eyes looked back at the adviser.

"We underestimated them before, and they destroyed many of our drones."

The adviser was already making her way toward the exit door. Without looking back at him, she responded to the Great Consulate's concerns.

“That won’t happen again. You sent all of your seekers after them, right? I’m certain they’ll eliminate them once and for all. And if they don’t I will have all the time in the world to take care of it myself.”

Just before reaching the door, the adviser paused, and again without looking back, she addressed the Great Consulate.

“Oh, and if you had any intentions of accessing the blocked silo codes, don’t bother. You can’t. Those codes were made obsolete and the warheads were dismantled almost ten years ago. The

Saudis have always preferred more conventional forms of global disruption.”

She was gone, leaving the Great Consulate alone once again, just as he preferred it.

“You should have killed her! She will kill you first! How could you be so stupid! And she knew about your plans for the silo codes already?”

Ah, the voice had finally returned to him. The voice was right of course, the adviser certainly did appear ready to eliminate him at some point in the near future. The Great Consulate was certain

his seekers killing the Dominatus survivors would impress the Saudis just enough though, to allow him more time to deal with the adviser.

“She treats you like a dog! Like a child! You must fight back!”

The Great Consulate lit yet another cigarette and stared out the window as night fell over the city, the New United Nations building casting a massive shadow over the tiny figures that scurried in the streets far below. He would fight back. And soon. First though, his seekers would destroy all of them on that silly train. Did they think themselves safe as they travelled to

wherever they intended to go? Idiots. Kill the Dominatus survivors, regain the favor of the Saudis, and find himself returned to his rightful place of glory, a god among the pathetic creatures of this world.

XXXIX.

The godfather watched as the Muslims entered Wilfrid. Hundreds of them drove or walked down the streets of what the welcome sign read as “the last real hometown on earth”, breaking windows, stealing food, looking for residents. They would find none though

– they had been sent off to an encampment nearly five miles north of Wilfrid where they had been ordered to remain until he contacted them to say it was ok to return.

For weeks his security forces had indicated an uptick in Muslim bandit activity. The arrival of Mac and the others from Dominatus confirmed this activity after they too had been attacked so close to Wilfrid. In years past, such attacks only took place much further to the south.

It would seem the Vancouver warlord had been given both ammunition and permission to move a large Muslim

force into parts of Alaska – Wilfrid was no doubt intended to be a nice little snack on their way to that much larger prize.

The godfather had made other plans though, plans that would no doubt inflict an incredible price against these Muslim scum he had spent so much of his life fighting against. These radicalized animals who raped and beheaded women and children at every given opportunity. They would not have the opportunity now though. Not today. The godfather, as always, was prepared.

He counted at least four hundred who had already entered Wilfrid in the last

twenty minutes, with handfuls more still straggling in. Military trucks, groups of heavily armed men, and even an old Vietnam era M113 armored assault vehicle. Reports had been coming in over the last forty eight hours of movements on the main roads from Vancouver up to Kitimat, and from there on the secondary roads toward Wilfrid.

A message from the Russian's wife confirmed the Dominatus survivors and Yakov had departed almost a full day earlier on their way toward Manitoba by the time the Muslim bandits began converging just outside Wilfrid. That would likely put them well past Terrace by now. From there the godfather knew

the speed at which the train could take them toward Manitoba would keep them well away from the trouble now visiting Wilfrid, trouble he intended to take care of very soon.

The godfather placed a microphone directly in front of him and powered it on, waiting a moment to confirm the intercom system was operating. He could hear his breathing bouncing back and forth between the numerous speakers that were hidden throughout Wilfrid. Some of the Muslim bandits were already looking up, wondering where the noise was coming from.

“Hello there you sick bastards. You

think you can come to my home and threaten my people? My family? My friends? This is Wilfrid you pathetic assholes! I'm the one they call the godfather, and I'm about to unleash a real big can of whoop-ass on the lot of you. Every last one. But before I do that, I'm gonna give you just one last little piece of heaven on earth. Enjoy it while it lasts, because once the music ends, you'll all be dead. Every...last...one of you."

The Dean Martin song *You're Nobody Until Somebody Loves You* blared from the many hidden speakers and upon the ears of the Muslim bandits, as the godfather happily sang along to the

lyrics inside of his private office on the second floor of his self-titled nightclub. He smiled widely as he watched bandits yelling and pointing to where they believed the music to be coming from.

The first explosion rocked the main entrance into Wilfrid, ripping apart the bodies of several armed Muslim bandits who were standing guard. The godfather leaned into his microphone, his voice coming in over the loudly playing song.

“That’s just the first of many boys. It’s boom time in little old Wilfrid, courtesy of yours truly.”

A second and third explosion erupted

from portions of Main Street, lifting the armored vehicle onto its side and killing everyone inside of it. Bandits were running down sidewalks and into empty buildings hoping to avoid the next blast.

Multiple blasts shook nearly every segment of Wilfrid as Dean Martin happily sang of the need for love and acceptance. The Muslims left alive were screaming in terror, trying to make their way back outside the town's protective wall. A military jeep sped down a side road no more than a hundred yards from the godfather's nightclub. Another explosion left the vehicle engulfed in flame, its occupants momentarily screaming from inside

before going silent, their bodies already burnt beyond recognition.

Twenty more explosions tore through Wilfrid over the course of the next two minutes, as the same Dean Martin song repeated itself on the intercom system. The buildings along Main Street were nearly gone, the street lamps obliterated. The library and school buildings were half destroyed, as were many of the private homes throughout the town. The monitors showed only a fraction of the Muslims who had so recently entered Wilfrid remained alive – perhaps as many as twenty of them.

“Ok then, those of you left...here I

come!”

The godfather looked to his right where Marcini stood silently near the desk.

“The boys ready to go?”

Marcini gave the godfather a short nod.

“Yes godfather. They’re all downstairs, just waiting for your word.”

Looking back at his monitors showing the surviving Muslims were now gathering at the far end of what was left of Main Street, nearest the town’s entrance.

“Well then Marcini – go tell them interlopers hello for me. To the last one Marcini...to the last one.”

Marcini nodded again and then made his way downstairs. The godfather leaned back in his dark brown leather chair as the images of six of his men, all heavily armed, filled one of the monitors. These six began walking down the street toward the area where the remaining Muslim bandits stood. There were just eighteen of them, and many of those appeared already injured.

It took his men no more than ten minutes to make the walk from the nightclub to the end of Main Street. When they were

just two hundred yards from the remaining Muslims, the godfather watched as his men, each carrying fully loaded AR15s, opened fire. Those bandits who were still able, immediately began running from the gunfire, but were the first to be shot dead. The others who remained, lay down their weapons and pleaded for their lives. Those too were shot dead until but a few Muslim bandits were left standing.

One of those few was a man that looked very familiar to the godfather. He zoomed in on the monitor image – a bandit with a long scar that ran along his face. The godfather called Marcini's communicator.

“Marcini, don’t kill the tall one there. We know him. We know him very well. Wait for my arrival, I’m coming to you. Give me about fifteen minutes.”

The godfather pulled up the same video he had shown the Dominatus survivors the day of their departure from Wilfrid, the footage of the killing of the Wilkinson family at the hands of the Muslims, particularly a Muslim with a very particular scar.

The images of the murder flashed across the godfather’s screen – the cutting off of Gerald Wilkinson’s head, the gouging out of Kate Wilkinson’s eyes, and the

promise of enslavement and certain death of the Wilkinson children. Now the godfather had at least one of the perpetrators of those killings just a short walk from his office. Some said revenge didn't make one feel better. The godfather had never subscribed to that way of thinking. Revenge ALWAYS made him feel better.

Standing up from his desk, the godfather put on his custom tailored jacket, running his hands along the sharp lines of the suit. He took a moment to make certain his hair was neatly combed back from his forehead, looked down to ensure his leather shoes held the proper shine on them, and then reached down below his

desk and brought out the classic Mossberg 500 shotgun he always kept loaded and hidden under there.

It was but a moment later he was making the walk down the just bombed Main Street sidewalks to where Mancini and his men were holding the last surviving Muslim invaders. When he arrived, he stood in front of the three men. The tallest of the three, the one with the facial scar, stood in the middle.

“So, do you know who I am?”

The three Muslims silently stared back at the godfather.

“This is my home. I built this place, and I loved it enough to destroy much of it today because it meant destroying you. That’s how much I hate everything about you fucking Muslim fanatic cocksuckers. Ever since you were brought here, you’ve done nothing but inflict pain and violence on everyone else. You’ve raped and murdered, and you do it, according to your twisted up hateful interpretation of religion – you do it all in the name of your god. And don’t tell me you’re one of the innocents, because I know better. YOU, the one in the middle, do you know how I know better?”

The Muslim who the godfather

addressed shook his head.

“No. I am simply following orders, from Vancouver. You would do well to let us go. I have powerful friends. They will avenge me.”

The godfather tilted his head to the left and smiled back at the bandit.

“You hear that Marcini? He comes here to kill us all, and now he threatens us to let him go. He has “powerful friends” huh? Is that right? I tell you what, how about I let the two others here go while you remain here with me. You wanna talk about avenging? How about we deal with you and what you did to some

friends of ours. A certain family...a wife and husband, and their kids. How about we do that?”

The taller bandit glanced down briefly before quickly shaking his head from side to side.

“No, you are confused. I am not who you think I am. I don’t know what you are speaking of. I did nothing to such people. I would not harm children. I did not harm those three children.”

The godfather lifted the shotgun and placed it directly in front of the Muslim bandit’s face, his voice responding to the bandit in a low, almost whispered

tone.

“How’d you know it was three children?”

The godfather then glanced at the remaining two men who stood on either side of the bandit who was filmed killing the Wilkinson family.

“You two – get going. Go back to whatever hole it is you crawled from and tell them what you saw here today. You fuck with me, I am gonna do the same a thousand times over back on you. You tell them to leave us the hell alone. And leave Alaska alone while you’re at it. Capiisce?”

The two bandits who were given permission to leave, turned and ran without looking back, leaving the godfather looking at the last one, the one with the scar on his face. The one who had personally cut off the heads of Gerald and Kate Wilkinson.

“That leaves you. Killer of innocent families. Rapist. All around piece of shit animal. So what to do with you huh? I tell you what – I got three rounds in this shotgun here. I’m gonna kill you slow, but not as slow as you killed that family in that cabin.”

The bandit’s eyes noticeably widened.

“Oh yeah, you remember now, don't you? You taped it. You wanted us to see it, right? Made threats against all of us. That was you alright. Got that ugly scar there, kind of your calling card, huh? So like I was saying - got three rounds. Gonna pump all three into you, but it's gonna be slow. I'm going to think on it a bit. I want you to think on it too. I want you to think on what you've done. The innocent people you've killed, all the shit that has been your miserable existence for so long now. And then I'm sending you to hell. You see, I believe in God too. The real deal God, the one who judges scum like you. The one that don't much care for

religions that twist up His words, or go out and purposely kill others for not believing that twisted shit you call your religion. In my religion, we got Old Testament and New Testament. Today...well today you're getting the Old Testament version."

The godfather fired the first round at close range into the lower portion of the Muslim bandit's groin, ripping through the area and leaving it a tattered, bleeding mess. The man was thrown backwards into the dirt, his hands reaching down for something no longer there, his screams echoing across the broken streets and bombed buildings of Wilfrid.

“Stand him back up.”

Marcini and two others grabbed the bandit by the arms and pulled him back to his feet. The Muslim was whimpering, begging for his life to be spared. The godfather looked back at him with cold disdain, the corners of his mouth turning downward.

“Oh, now you ain’t so tough, huh? Where are the threats, the promises of being avenged? And look at you! There’s nothing left of you down there! Just a bloody hole! Guess you won’t be raping any more children now, will you? I got two more rounds though...

this journey of yours ain't done just yet.”

The second shotgun blast was aimed at the bandit's right shoulder. The impact of the shot tore through muscle and bone, causing the man's arm to fall off and hit the ground. The Muslim looked down at his appendage in shock, his mind grappling to reason what his eyes were telling him had just happened. The hand spasmed several times, its fingers opening and closing before it finally ceased moving.

“Well look at that! What an amazing thing the human body is. Looked to me like that hand was damn happy to no longer be a part of the rest of you!

Guess that's easy enough to understand, considering all the sick shit you've done."

The bandit had fallen to his knees, his one remaining hand propping himself up from falling completely over.

"That leaves one more round. One more time for you. Can you hear the seconds just ticking away now? I wonder if that's what the father whose head you cut off with that dirty little knife felt? You took your time cutting him up, didn't you? More time than I've taken here. I've given you more mercy today than you deserve, much-much more. God ain't gonna be so merciful. There's not

gonna be a hundred virgins waiting for you in some after-life, or whatever other bullshit you pigs tell yourself to justify the shit you do. No, you're gonna meet up with some real judgment very soon now. Tick-tock-tick-tock, your time here is all up."

The third round was pointed directly under the bandit's jaw. The shotgun blast tore through the neck, ripping the head with almost surgical precision from the body.

"Take this thing out miles from here and dump it. Let some wolf or bear come across it and eat it up and shit it out. At least then it can serve some kind of

purpose.”

The godfather looked back to survey the remnants of Wilfrid, the town he had built up over the years that now lay in near ruin, destroyed so that it may survive.

“Contact the new government in Alaska. Tell them they don’t have a Muslim invasion problem to worry about anymore, at least not anytime soon. And tell the others to come back to town. We got work to do. We start rebuilding today.”

XL.

Dublin had lost track of how long they had been on the train. It had to have been at least ten hours, possibly longer. The route had taken them high up into a mountain pass, where the limbs of massive trees reached out like arms that gently brushed the sides of the train as it sped past them. There were dilapidated tunnels, several bridges, and a number of hairpin turns that left Dublin's stomach momentarily shifting uncomfortably inside of her.

And still the train sped down the tracks, hour after hour after hour.

Mac woke but once during that time. He raised himself up from his seat and smiled warmly back at Dublin while running a hand along Brando's neck. The Doberman had not left his place at Mac's feet since the trip had resumed following the conflict with the Muslim bandits.

Cooper Wyse also spent several hours sleeping away, the brim of his cowboy hat pulled down over his eyes in the manner the rest of the group had become so accustomed to seeing him do. He did take a moment to look outside from time to time in an attempt to estimate both the train's speed and their current location.

“Managing to run at about thirty miles an hour going through the pass. Not bad. I would guess we’re about two hours from Dawson Creek, assuming that’s where the Russian is heading.”

Reese sat next to Dublin holding her hand as both of them glanced several times back at the sleeping figure of Mac Walker. Without speaking of it, they both sensed how concerned the other was for Mac’s condition. While his breathing seemed to have smoothed out some, his skin had an odd, whitish pallor to it that they had never seen, and his eyes seemed to have retreated further into his skull. It was Mac’s eyes that bothered Dublin the most, for they were

now communicating something back to her that she had never seen from Mac Walker – fear.

As the train reached the apex of the mountain pass and began to make its way downhill, its speed increased considerably, so much so that it awoke Cooper who again looked out a window to estimate their speed.

“Maybe fifty, even sixty miles an hour. Be to Dawson in no time now.”

The rancher stood up and placed his hands against the small of his back and stretched to the left and then to the right. He walked over to Brando and leaned

down to scratch behind the dog's ears before standing back up and looking over at Dublin and Reese.

‘Mind if I sit a spell with you two?’

Reese was the first to answer.

“Sure Coop – c’mon over.”

The rancher took the seat next to Reese and stretched out his legs in front of him, taking a brief moment to gather his thoughts before he spoke.

“So what do you think the weapon is this priest is supposed to have all the way up there in Churchill?”

Reese crossed his arms over his chest and leaned back slightly.

“Not sure. Maybe some new kind of gun that that can be quickly replicated to shoot the drones down?”

Dublin shook her head as her eyes continued to watch the trees speed past the windows of the passenger car.

“No...I think it's something more than that. Bigger.”

Cooper Wyse glanced over at Dublin, his eyebrows raising slightly.

“Nuclear?”

It was Reese who shook his head.

“No way. No way the New United Nations lets a nuke sit out there somewhere without going after it. Can’t be that. A nuclear weapon would give off a signature, the surveillance drones would pick it up. They couldn’t hide something like that.”

“There’s no drones in Canada. Not many anyway. And probably not any all the way up in Churchill. Might be why that’s the location we are heading.”

Dublin made a good point, causing

Reese to reconsider his just spoken position on the subject of hiding a nuclear weapon from the authorities.

“It ain’t a nuke. Whatever it is – it ain’t that.”

Mac raised himself into a sitting position and looked back at Dublin, Reese, and Cooper.

“The globalists despise nuclear weapons. Nuclear power. Always have. From day one, they’ve worked to eliminate them. Not because it was the right thing to do, but separate nations with their own nuclear arsenals would prevent the move toward globalization.

It's why back in 2009, 2010, there was such a mad push for disarmament. It's why the globalists despised and feared Reagan so much – his whole “peace through strength” position was the antithesis of the one government for all concept the globalists clung so strongly to.

Sure, they used those little dirty bombs taken from Libya to create panic and disorder, make almost everyone hope for some kind of central authority to make it all better...but after that, the New United Nations spent all kinds of resources shutting down every nuclear program in the world. The Saudis had been pushing for that for decades, and they finally had

their way. I'm with Reese – whatever is waiting for us up in Churchill, it isn't some kind of nuclear weapon.”

Cooper Wyse grinned back at Mac.

“For a man who just woke up, you sure have a lot to say.”

The train's speed began to slow down again as the screeching of the locomotive's brakes were being applied. Cooper stood up and walked toward a window, peering out into the late afternoon landscape outside. At the same time he was doing that, Bear's legs could be seen passing by that same window as he made his way to the back

of the passenger car.

The big man opened the door and stood before the group, every inch of him covered in a thick layer of dark coal dust.

“The Russian is stopping here for a few hours. Says he needs to add water to the system and check out a valve that’s making some noise. I thought maybe we could grab a quick bite to eat, you know...have a meal together. Yakov says once we’re back up and running, we should be well into Manitoba in another seven or eight hours.”

Mac was trying to suppress a smile as he

looked back at the coal-dust covered Bear.

“You started this trip a white bear and now you’re a black bear!”

Bear rolled his eyes.

“Hah-hah Mac. Don’t quit the day job.”

Cooper appeared amused by Bear’s appearance as well.

“Now I don’t know you as well as the others here Bear, but I have to say, you look downright satisfied to be helping Yakov run this train.”

Bear's teeth flashed white as his smile broke out amidst his dark, dust layered skin.

“To tell you the truth, as long as I can remember, I've always loved trains. I used to have a little model set in my room when I was a kid. Would sit there for hours running it. This train is awesome. Shoveling that coal, the heat of the firebox, the sound of the wheels turning, all the smoke and dust, and the wind blowing by you when you stick your head out of the cab...I could have done this for a living and been as happy as a pig in shit.”

“Bear! Son-of-a-bitch where are you?

Look for the water!”

The Russian’s voice was booming just outside the passenger car.

Bear’s face turned into that of a six year old boy who had just been caught doing something wrong.

“Shit – gotta go. Yakov wants me helping to look for a water source to refill the system.”

Mac, Reese, Dublin, Cooper, and even Brando watched as Bear quickly turned and exited from the passenger car to join the Russian outside. Yakov handed Bear a simple bucket and pointed toward the

trees.

“Find a stream, snow, anything, and fill that bucket. Be back here quick now.”

Mac looked out a window in amazement at how Bear simply nodded at the Russian's orders and began running off into the woods holding the bucket.

“All that time in Dominatus and I never had Bear ever do something I asked him to do that quickly, and sure as hell not that willingly.”

Cooper stood next to Mac and joined him in watching Bear's departure.

“You didn’t own a train. I’ve always found that when a person gets to do something they love, it ain’t work to them, no matter how hard that something is that needs doing. For me, it’s always been horses, animals...and pretty much being left alone. For Bear, well, it looks like it’s being around a train. Who would have known, huh?”

Mac covered his mouth with his right hand in an attempt to suppress another cough.

“And what about me then Coop? What’s my love in this life?”

Cooper Wyse glanced back at Mac as a

small smile crept across his face.

“Much as I can tell Mac, you’re all about kicking ass...and trying to do the right thing.”

Mac Walker grunted softly, his eyes closing for a moment. He appeared pleased at Cooper’s description of him.

“Maybe so Coop. Maybe so...”

XLI.

While Bear and the Russian refilled the locomotive’s water system and

inspected the valve that had Yakov concerned, Dublin and Reese insisted they prepare a meal for everyone to be eaten once the work on the train was completed. The work though, went longer than the Russian had first estimated, due to the valve that had been making noise, having been slightly bent during the journey from Wilfrid.

Yakov assured them he could repair the valve, though they would likely remain stopped on the tracks for several more hours.

“I apologize. Valve must be repaired though. Cannot risk further damage to engine.”

Dublin offered to have Bear join them for the meal, but the big man declined, wanting instead to help Yakov repair the train. He simply grabbed a heaping portion of food for himself and the Russian, and then happily returned to the front of the train.

That left Mac and Cooper to share the meal Dublin and Reese had prepared for the evening in the small cooking area of the passenger car. It was a simple meal of bread and dark stew Dublin was able to make from some cured meats, stored vegetables, and water. Despite its simplicity, or perhaps because of it, each of the four declared it to be

delicious.

Mac ate far less than the others though, slowly moving his spoon within the bowl of stew and picking small bits from the bread. As the others finished their own servings, Mac cleared his throat and looked up at each of them.

“I figure you all know that...something is not right with me. Well, fact is, I got a form of cancer – lung cancer. Had it confirmed by Doc Miller back in Juneau.”

Dublin leaned forward, trying to look more directly at Mac as she placed her right hand over his.

“Cancer? Why not get a vaccine Mac? I’m sure there’s people who can get access it.”

Mac looked back at Dublin with gratitude, sensing how much she cared for his well being.

“Sure...if it was a normal type of cancer that would be no problem. It ain’t a normal cancer though. Doc said it was some kind of manufactured version. No vaccine for it. At least not one he or anyone he knows is aware of.”

Reese’s eyes openly expressed his sadness and horror over what Mac was

telling them.

“Just like my dad. A one in a million type of cancer – no cure.”

Mac nodded.

“That’s right Reese. Same thing Doc Miller said to me. Whatever this thing is, it was put into me. I didn’t just develop it. It was made and injected into me. Like some kind of contingency death sentence that I couldn’t escape from.”

Dublin was slowly shaking her head as her eyes welled with tears.

“Who could have done that Mac?
How?”

Mac’s jaw clenched as his eyes flashed angrily, and for a moment, he almost looked like the Mac during the Dominatus years. Strong, assured - always determined. That moment quickly passed though, as the eyes clouded over again, and his body seemed to fall into itself.

“It was Hess.”

Reese’s eyes opened wide in shock and confusion.

“Hess? The Special Operations

Officer?”

Mac answered Reese with a brief nod.

“Yeah – Hess. When we had that fight. Remember? That was his idea. Doc Miller showed me the entrance point of the injection. Likely just a quick jab of a needle and as I was fighting for my life, I wouldn’t have even noticed. Been inside of me ever since. Been ripping through my lungs...can feel it in my lower back. And I’m so damn tired. Don’t have an appetite. I’m dying. No sense trying to say it any different. I’m dying and doin’ it quick.”

Silence overtook the conversation, as the

light outside steadily crept toward darkness.

Heavy footsteps were heard approaching the back of the train from outside. Bear walked in to see Mac and the others sitting next to one another but saying nothing. The heavy mood inside the passenger car was unmistakable.

“What’s going on?”

Bear’s question was left unanswered for several seconds before Reese invited him to sit down with them. Mac’s condition was explained to Bear, who sat silently listening, his face betraying no emotion. When the explanation was

concluded, Bear looked Mac over before asking him a question.

“Tell me one thing Mac – why didn’t you just stay in Alaska? Why not rested there with Lucille? She’d take care of you.”

Once more Mac’s eyes grew hard and cold as a flash of the old Mac re-ignited again.

“You think I’m the kind of man who wants to be made over? Someone who will lie in bed fading away until there’s nothing of them left? Is that how you see me Bear? I’m on this trip for the same reasons you are. Trying to help set

things more right, give people a chance to fight back. People like you, your wife, and your kids. People like Reese and Dublin, and whatever life they might have together in the years to come. If people like us don't take a stand, hell, it really is all over, isn't it? We can't sit back and wait for someone else to do it for us. So yeah, sick as I am, and maybe I should have said something sooner but you know, it's my damn business...sick as I am, I'm still taking that stand. I'm still fighting that fight. It's all I know how to do. So...I'll keep doing it until I can't do it no more. Same way your dad tried to fight for you all those years ago."

Bear noticeably winced at the mention of his father, but then his face returned to calm, and he nodded his head back at Mac.

“Fine Mac. You do what you got to do. I’m there for you. I’m sure we all are. Sick or not, I’m glad to have you on our side. I want you to know that.”

Bear stood back up as he informed the group that the Russian estimated they would not be moving again until early morning. A crack was discovered outside the boiler housing. He’s doing some kind of silicone weld but says it will take time to set properly – at least six hours. As Bear turned to go,

Yakov's figure filled the doorway at the back of the passenger car.

“You tell them about delay?”

Bear answered yes.

“Good. We go as soon as possible. Until then, we rest. Relax. Lots of travel tomorrow.”

The Russian sensed there was something being left unsaid as he looked from Bear to the others. It was Bear who stepped forward to explain to Yakov what they had been discussing regarding Mac's condition. The Russian let Bear finish and then shrugged his wide shoulders.

“He die. You die. We all die. Until then, we live. Simple.”

Mac chuckled.

‘See, told you I liked him. Don’t get more basic than that.’

Yakov held up a finger to the group, signaling he wanted them to wait for him to return. A few minutes later he re-entered the passenger car carrying a bottle in his right hand which he proudly held up in front of him.

“Tonight – we drink.”

Yakov fell into a seat to Mac's left and opened the bottle of Stolichnaya, taking a long swig before handing it to the former Navy SEAL while indicating Mac had no choice as to whether or not he cared to join him.

“Drink.”

Mac paused, looking at the open bottle.

“I don't know Yakov...I'm not feeling too well right now.”

The Russian clapped a hand on Mac's upper back with enough force to cause the older man to slump forward in his seat.

“So drink! Feel better! Don’t be pussy.”

Mac’s eyes narrowed as he looked back at Yakov.

“You know, I was drinking this shit with former KGB when your momma was still wiping the mess from your ass.”

The Russian broke out into laughter at Mac’s reference.

“Good! Good! You tough guy then! So drink up tough guy!”

Mac took an even longer drink from the bottle than the Russian had before

handing it over to Cooper Wyse.

“Your turn cowboy.”

Cooper took the vodka from Mac’s hands, slowly looking over the bold red and gold labeling.

“I really don’t think you wanna get into a drinking match with an Irish cowboy.”

Yakov waived a dismissive hand at the rancher.

“Hah! This is Russian vodka! Irish cannot keep up. Pretenders.”

Cooper Wyse lifted the bottle back and

proceeded to drink nearly twice the amount either Yakov or Mac had.

“Not exactly a pint of dark, but it’ll do in a pinch.”

The bottle was then handed to Bear, who took a small sip, his face wrinkling in disgust.

“Never liked that shit.”

The Russian appeared horrified at Bear’s remark.

“You don’t like vodka?”

Bear confirmed the fact for a second

time.

“NO – I don’t like vodka.”

Reese was the next to drink. He did so without complaint, though appeared only slightly more impressed with the vodka than Bear was. Dublin though, grabbed the bottle from Reese in her right hand while moving her hair aside with her left hand and tilted both her head and the bottle as far back as was comfortable while a considerable amount of the clear liquid disappeared down her throat.

The men sat momentarily stunned at Dublin’s display of drinking prowess. Dublin in turn smiled and then laughed,

pumping a fist in victory.

“New York for the win baby!”

For the next hour, they each sat laughing and sharing stories in the passenger car, its interior lit by two oil lanterns that hung from the ceiling. The contents of the bottle grew less and less as the bond between each of them grew steadily stronger. During a brief pause in the conversation, Reese grew serious again, posing a question he had long pondered since leaving Dominatus after the drone attacks.

“What do you think was the single biggest reason for America’s downfall?”

Why were so many willing to give up so much for so little?”

The Russian grunted.

“United States was once big shot. It grow fat and lazy. People stopped working. Wanted something for nothing. Your politicians fed them promises of things for nothing. My grandfather tell me how it was in Soviet Union. Same thing. Promises of things for nothing. What they really get is nothing for everything. All freedom gone. Opportunity gone. Government controls it all.”

Mac closed his eyes. He was struggling

to stay awake, but he also wanted to answer Reese's question. He had recalled a similar conversation with him back in Dominatus.

“You know, Yakov's right. We did get lazy. Nobody wanted to bother paying attention to what was really going on. The political class knew that. Knew how to use our own ignorance and laziness against us. They played on our greed and our insecurities. Got the country so divided up against itself. Political correctness probably destroyed more lives than anything else back then. Political correctness made people stop having real conversations. Made schools into little government approved

factories for an agenda that was all about controlling you from the day you were born until the day you died and making you believe that was the way it was supposed to be. More and more people just started accepting being told what to do. Accepted the drones flying over their homes, watching them 24/7. Accepted having someone monitor what they drank and what they ate, and what they said, and what they might be thinking.”

Mac’s voice began to trail off as sleep took hold, his words coming more slowly.

“Tell you this, if we really do get a

chance to start over, to hit some kind of re-set button, I sure hope those people appreciate that kind of opportunity. We sure didn't. Not before it was too late. Too...damn...late."

XLII.

Mac awoke before the others, his head aching slightly from the drinking done the night before. Daylight had just started to break outside. As he sat up, the headache worsened slightly, causing him to smile. It felt good to be hung over. In an odd way, it was a reminder of just how alive he still was.

Reese and Dublin slept in their seats next to each other, while Bear lay across the floor of the passenger car, snoring loudly. Cooper was lying back in a seat two rows away from Mac, while the Russian, like Bear, was on his back at the far end of the passenger car seemingly in competition with the volume of Bear's snoring.

Brando raised his head to look back at Mac, the dog's intelligent eyes signaling his approval of seeing Mac wake up for another day.

While making his way quietly to the back exit door Mac was barely able to

muffle a gasp from the deep pain that coursed down his spine. His legs buckled as Mac leaned against the wall of the passenger car. He focused on taking deep, measured breaths until the pain passed. It took nearly a minute before the pain subsided enough that he could continue making his way outside.

The air greeted Mac like a cold slap across his face, causing his skin to tingle. He found the experience invigorating, helping him to wake more fully and take his mind off the still throbbing pain in his lower back. Stepping down onto the ground, he inhaled deeply, taking in the scents of the arctic like air. The tall trees that lined

either side of the train tracks loomed over Mac, silently looking down at him from above.

Mac heard the door of the passenger car open behind him and saw the Russian jumping down from the platform to join him.

“Ah! Good morning! Feeling better?”

Mac considered the question and decided that yes, he was feeling better.

“Yeah, as a matter of fact, I am. I didn’t wake up coughing my lungs out, so that was a pleasant change from the last few weeks.”

The Russian smiled and nodded his head. His beard and hair appeared to have taken on a life of its own overnight, appearing even more unkempt than before.

“See! Vodka!”

Mac shrugged.

“Maybe.”

Yakov began walking to the front of the train, his voice trailing behind him.

“No maybe. Just yes. Vodka!”

Mac stretched his arms above his head, and then leaned over to touch his feet. He really was feeling better, the pain in his back notwithstanding. Sunlight was now breaking through the trees, casting a beautiful glow over the Russian's beloved train.

Going back into the passenger car, he found Cooper Wyse up as well. The rancher was whispering to Brando, asking the Doberman if he wanted to go outside.

“Well hello there Mac. Nice to see you looking better.”

Mac wondered if the compliment

actually reflected how he looked.

“Am I really looking better Coop?”

The rancher stood up and looked back at Mac.

“Yeah – I’d say so. Quite a bit better, actually. Guess that Russian vodka agrees with you.”

Mac rubbed his temples.

“Tell that to my head.”

Within the next hour, Bear, Reese, and Dublin also awoke. Dublin in particular appeared to be hurting the most from the

impacts of the evening's choice of drink.

“Ok guys...remind me not to do that again for a while.”

Bear chuckled at Dublin's discomfort, and then proceeded to do an impression of Yakov for the others.

“Vodka good! You drink it good! Make you feel all better!”

Dublin began to laugh at how accurate Bear's voice took on the Russian's accent and tone, but then stopped abruptly as she looked behind Bear to see Yakov staring back at her.

Bear continued with his impression, unaware the Russian stood just behind him.

“Drink vodka! Don’t be pussy! Vodka! Vodka! Vodka!”

Getting no response from Dublin or the others, Bear looked back at them in frustration.

“What? I thought that was pretty good. Sounds just like him.”

Yakov cleared his throat.

Bear froze, his eyes rolling from side to side in a vain attempt to somehow see in

the back of his head.

The Russian began to clap slowly.

“Very good, yeah? You sound like me? Ok then. Now get your ass back to front of train and fill the firebox with coal. We have many hours to travel.”

Bear turned himself slowly around, his hands held up in front of him.

“Didn’t mean anything by it Yakov. Just having a little fun.”

Yakov nodded back at Bear.

“Of course – of course! Just a little fun!

No hard feelings. We shake on it. All good then.”

Bear appeared relieved, extending his right hand out toward the Russian, who proceeded to grasp it firmly in his own. Yakov smiled back at Bear as he began squeezing the taller man’s hand as Bear attempted to continue appearing as if the increasing pressure was not causing him any discomfort. The fact was though, he already wanted to cry out in pain, so powerful was the Russian’s grip.

Sensing he had made his point, Yakov released Bear’s hand and began making his way back outside.

“Hurry up. Fill the firebox so we can begin warming the engine.”

Bear followed close behind the Russian, gently rubbing his right hand as he did so.

As soon as the door closed behind him, Dublin started giggling again, soon joined by the others. Mac in particular found it difficult to contain his laughter.

“Those two make one hell of an odd couple, but I do believe they were made for one another!”

A voice cut across the interior of the passenger car, originating from Mac’s

portable shortwave that he had just turned on shortly after waking. Walking over to where he had left it, he adjusted the radio's volume to ensure everyone else could hear. The voice was that of Royce Calhoun, leader of the Texas Resistance – the man who had requested they make their way to Churchill, Manitoba in search of an alleged weapon to be used against the New United Nations.

“This is Mac Walker – please repeat.”

Mac and the others waited silently for a response. None came.

“This is Mac Walker – repeat your last

message.”

Royce Calhoun’s voice again issued from the shortwave.

“Mac, this is Calhoun. I need you to know...we are running out of time down here. They got us pinned along the border, bombing the hell out of us inside Texas, and coordinating attacks from the drug cartels in Mexico. What is your ETA to destination?”

Mac pushed the transmit button on the handheld.

“We are within twenty four hours. Repeat – twenty four hours.”

There was another pause of nearly a minute in the communication before Royce Calhoun responded.

“Mac, we need that weapon. I have been assured it is real and it can be effective. Don’t want to say exactly how over the open signal here in case we’re being monitored. We need you to get to the assigned location as soon as possible. Look for the church.

Our status down here is reaching...it ain’t good Mac. Maybe a few days left, a week at most. We lost over a hundred yesterday to another drone attack. Some days the skies are almost completely

filled with these goddamn drones, one bombing attack after another. Our numbers are down to a few thousand active. Losing more every day. I'm swamped with injured men and women, people who haven't had water in days, or food in over a week. Received confirmation they are assembling more drones for Alaska too. Gonna come in strong up there. Do you understand?"

Mac looked up at Reese, Dublin and Cooper before he answered Royce Calhoun.

"We understand. Doing our best. Give us another twenty four."

Royce Calhoun's voice betrayed the immense stress he was under attempting to lead the newly formed Texas Resistance against the drone might that was the New United Nations.

“God help us Mac. You got twenty four hours. After that...I don't know if there'll be anything left to save down here.”

The communication went silent.

Mac rose from his seat slowly, bracing for the now always present pain in his back to intensify.

“I'm going to talk to Yakov. We need to

get this fucking train moving – NOW.”

The group followed Mac out of the passenger car and toward the locomotive where Bear was still filling the firebox with coal. The Russian emerged from the front of the train, looking back at Mac and the others, wondering what it was they wanted.

“Yakov, I need you to get us moving again. Right now. We need to be in Churchill by tomorrow. No later. This train needs to be pushed to its limits. Can you do that for us?”

Yakov stroked his massive, unruly beard as his dark eyes looked back at Mac.

“We go too fast, it could damage engine. Then, we don’t go at all.”

Mac took another step toward the Russian, his face attempting to convey how desperate the situation had become.

“I understand that Yakov, but we have to risk it now. Our people in Texas, they’re getting the shit kicked out of them by the drones. We need that weapon, whatever it is they are hiding up there in Churchill, we need to get it right now. If we don’t...thousands of people will be killed and everything we’ve been fighting for will be lost. Not just in Texas – everywhere.”

Bear had stepped from the locomotive cab and stood next to Mac.

“Are they coming for Alaska Mac? The drones?”

Mac nodded at Bear’s question, though his eyes remained locked on the Russian.

Yakov looked back at Mac, and then each one of the others, and then glanced over to his train.

“Ok, we go. Like you want to, we go as fast as possible. I can do this. I will push her fast. You want to take that risk, then that is what I will do. We are

almost ready. Ten more minutes then we go.”

Mac extended his right hand toward the Russian, who engulfed it in his own.

“Thank you Yakov. Do your best. That’s all I’m asking of you.”

Mac and the others returned to the passenger car while Yakov and Bear finalized preparations to get the train moving. Within minutes, the wheels of the locomotive were slowly turning as the now familiar clouds of dark smoke belched from the great machine’s smoke stack.

Hearing the train's movements, several sets of dark eyes turned toward the direction of the sound, as mouths opened wide to emit a piercing shriek, communicating to the others that the targets had been found. Dark bodies bolted forward down the train tracks as they collectively realized how close they now were to their prey.

The seekers were once again coming.

XLIII.

Brando's head snapped up off of the floor, his lips pulled back in a snarl.

Cooper Wyse's right hand instinctively went to one of his two Colt revolvers as he looked down at the Doberman and then toward the back of the passenger car where the dog's eyes were locked.

Reese and Dublin had already noticed Brando's warning growl as well, and were walking slowly toward the back of the train, their eyes straining to see any sign of approaching trouble. Mac followed directly behind them, his M16 held in his hands.

“Anyone see anything?”

Both Dublin and Reese shook their heads. The track behind them was clear.

Cooper Wyse was not looking to the back of the train though. His eyes were now scanning the trees that lined both sides of the tracks.

“If something is gonna come at us, they’ll use the trees for cover. They could be right on top of us before we’d be able to see them.”

The train’s speed was not yet twenty miles an hour. Mac grabbed one of the handheld communicators and attempted to call Bear.

“Bear – can you hear me?”

There was no response. Mac repeated the attempt.

“Bear – this is Mac. Come in.”

In the locomotive cab, Bear was shoveling yet more coal into the firebox as Yakov adjusted the water settings, attempting to create as much steam power as quickly as possible without causing catastrophic failure to the entire system. Both the noise and the heat inside the cab were considerable.

Bear paused, thinking he had heard his name being called. He looked up at the Russian, seeing if it was Yakov who had said something.

“You call my name?”

The Russian glanced quickly down at Bear and shook his head.

Mac made a third attempt to reach Bear as Brando’s growling snarls increased in volume.

“Bear! Pick up your communicator! Come in Bear!”

This time Bear was certain he heard his name being called from somewhere. Finally he realized it was from the communicator he had placed in the back of his pants pocket.

“Yeah Mac! You got to speak loud – it’s noisy up here! I can hardly hear you!”

Mac shouted into his communicator back at Bear.

“I’m pretty sure we got company! Could be those seekers again! We need this train moving fast!”

The Russian, able to hear Mac’s words, began nodding his head repeatedly as he continued to adjust the water settings.

“Yes! Go fast! I already tell him I am doing that! Yakov cannot change

physics! Train is going as fast as train can go!”

Bear shouted back at Mac.

“We’re doing all we can up here Mac! In another ten minutes we should be hitting about thirty miles an hour, and then we hope to be going double that speed soon after that!”

Two loud bumps came from above Mac’s head. Something was on the passenger car’s roof.

“There!”

Cooper Wyse was pointing into the

woods at the back right of the train. Three seekers broke from the tree-line and were preparing to jump onto the rear platform of the passenger car. Brando's sharp canine teeth snapped shut several times as he unleashed a barrage of increasingly aggressive barks.

Another series of bumps were heard from the top of the train car.

Mac glanced upward, his mind racing to assess the situation and develop an adequate response strategy.

“Cooper, take the door in the back. Don't fire unless you have a shot. We can't waste any ammunition. Dublin and

Reese, I want you two in the very middle of the car here. One of you watch the left side, the other the right. I'll be at the front of the car doing the same thing.”

Mac again spoke into his communicator.

“Bear! We have confirmation of seekers! They are on the outside of the passenger car! On the roof! Some of them may be attempting to make their way to the front of the train!”

Bear dropped the shovel and leaned out the right side of the locomotive's cab to look for any sign of the seekers. If they were on the train, he was unable to see them. Yakov was cursing loudly in

Russian, slamming his hand down onto the engine's metal control panel.

“Ok! Ok! Enough of this shit! You! Go out and take them off of my train!”

Bear looked back at the Russian, his jaw dropping at the order.

“You want me to go out there – onto the roof?”

Yakov pointed behind him.

“Yes! Climb out of here and take care of it! Simple!”

Bear shook his head.

“No way Yakov. We’re doing almost thirty miles an hour! No way I’m going out there! I’ll fall off!”

The Russian looked back to the control console and released yet more water into the boiler, causing the engine to groan under the strain as the train lurched forward at an increased speed. Satisfied the controls were set enough to allow his temporary absence from the locomotive, Yakov began to climb outside to make his way toward the passenger car, a huge knife clenched between his teeth. Bear reached out to grab the Russian’s left arm.

“Yakov! You can’t go out there! You have to drive the train!”

The Russian poked his head back into the cab, removing the knife from his mouth as he did so.

“Train drive itself! You too afraid to take care of seekers, then I do it! Stay here!”

Returning the knife to his mouth, Yakov moved quickly to the back of the locomotive and then onto the passenger car, grabbed a handhold, and easily pulled himself up onto the roof. He braced himself against the wind that pummeled his back as he looked

downward and was greeted by a sight that caused even the Russian to draw a sharp breath inward.

XLIV.

Ten seekers crawled toward Yakov, their bodies pressed against the roof of the passenger car. Their mouths hung open as their heads began to move up and down excitedly at the sight and smell of the Russian crouched just twenty feet away.

Taking the knife from his mouth and gripping it tightly in his right hand,

Yakov's eyes narrowed as he tried to determine which of the two seekers closest to him would likely pounce first.

“You ugly things get off my fucking train!”

Inside the passenger car, Mac and the others heard the unmistakable voice of the Russian shouting from above them. Reese was already moving toward the rear exit door, one of the remaining shotguns in his hands. Cooper cut him off right before Reese reached the door, the rancher's right hand resting on the barrel of the shotgun.

“That won't work up there. You could

just as easily end up shooting Yakov while trying to hit the seekers. Too wide of a spread unless you can get real close. You're better off keeping that thing ready in case any of those things try to get inside here."

Reese looked over to Mac.

"He's right Reese, that's the wrong kind of weapon for what you need to do up there."

The Russian was again yelling from above them.

"Then what's the right weapon Mac?"

Mac pointed to Cooper.

“He’s got the guns for the job. Let him go.”

Cooper Wyse removed his cowboy hat and placed it carefully on the seat closest to the exit.

“Be right back for that.”

The rancher opened the passenger car door and began climbing up toward the roof, his right hand holding one of the Colt pistols. The second revolver remained holstered on his left hip.

The seeker to the Russian’s left lunged

first, its wide mouth letting out a high pitched hissing growl as its body catapulted itself against the force of the wind blowing back against it. Yakov leaned to his right as his left hand shot out to grab the seeker's throat. He had intended to sink the large blade into the seeker's back, but found the momentum of his right arm halted as another seeker's jaws clamped down tightly on his forearm, its rows of sharp teeth cutting through his heavy winter jacket and into his flesh.

The Russian screamed, first in shock and pain, and then in rage. Yakov's eyes glanced forward to see two more seekers preparing to lunge toward him

as his instincts told him there were simply too many to overcome. He was going to die.

“Ok then! I die today! But I don’t die easy!”

The Russian jerked his right arm upward, lifting the seeker’s body entirely off the passenger train roof. He then slammed it downward with as much force as his considerable strength could create, causing the temporarily stunned seeker to release its bite on his arm. Yakov managed to maintain his grip on the knife, which he plunged deeply into the seeker’s chest.

The other seeker that remained in the grip of the Russian's left hand grabbed a handful of Yakov's beard in its talon-tipped fingers, ripping a large chunk of hair from his face. The pain from that was worse than the biting wound to his forearm. The Russian screamed again as he brought the knife into the shoulder area of the seeker, causing the creature to let out a piercing shriek as it lurched backwards, ripping the knife from Yakov's grip.

Sensing the Russian was without a weapon, the other two seekers that had been preparing to join the fight chose that moment to do so, both of their bodies flying toward Yakov, their

inhumanly wide mouths open and snarling, their dark eyes burning with anticipation of the kill.

Yakov dove against the roof, hoping the creatures would pass over him. He sensed rather than felt a large figure rise up from behind him, and then heard the crunching impact of the seekers slamming into something – or someone.

Bear caught both seekers, one on top of each of his massive shoulders. He could feel their claws digging into his back as he pushed his momentum forward and then down, slamming the monsters so hard against the steel roofed train he both heard and felt their spines

simultaneously snap in several places.

Six more seekers remained atop the train, slowly making their way toward Bear and the Russian. Yakov had regained his feet and crouched just behind Bear, who glared back at the remaining seekers.

“What do we do now?”

Yakov considered Bear’s question, soon realizing he had but one answer.

“We fight.”

A loud whistle sounded from behind the seekers, causing them to halt their

movement toward the Russian and Bear as they looked behind them. At the far end of the passenger car's roof stood Cooper Wyse, his feet spread wide, a Colt revolver in each of his hands as the wind whipped the lower portion of his jacket behind him.

This time the seekers did not pause in their attack. All six came at Cooper as one, with frightening speed as their bodies sped along the train roof toward him.

Coop Wyse's guns proved quicker - much quicker.

Six shots rang out, three from each

revolver. Four seekers stumbled and then fell from the train roof. The other two, though injured and somewhat slower, continued to move toward the rancher. As the seekers leaped in the air, their clawed hands extended outward, Cooper dropped to his knees and with both barrels pointed in front of him, fired off two more rounds. Both bullets found their mark, entering the front skull of a seeker and exiting out the back in a considerable spray of blood, bone, and brain matter.

Standing back up, the rancher took a moment to twirl both guns in each hand several times before returning them to their respective holsters and making his

way back down the side of the train and into the passenger car.

So impressed was he with Cooper Wyse's display, Yakov pointed a finger at the departing rancher while looking back at Bear, a wide grin breaking out across the Russian's now only partially bearded and bleeding face.

“Oh – you see that? That was good! Like in the old movies! A real cowboy!”

Even as he made his way back into the cab of the locomotive the Russian was voicing his continued amazement.

“A real cowboy! Bang! Bang!”

Bear looked back at Yakov.

“Hey, what about me? I took care of two of those things. And without a weapon!”

The Russian appeared to consider Bear’s words, but then waived him away.

“You did good...but not a cowboy! Bang! Bang! That was good! Very impressive!”

The train was moving at nearly forty miles an hour. Just a mile behind its

location, nearly seventy seekers followed the train's path, pausing only briefly to inhale the death scent of the ten seeker bodies that lay strewn along the tracks. The largest of the seekers, the same one that had first followed the Dominatus survivors to the Wyse Ranch in Alaska, unleashed a furious howling scream as it began bounding down the middle of the rail lines, its speed almost matching that of the departing train.

XLV.

“So good to see you again Mac.”

Alexander Meyer's voice was much stronger than Mac remembered it. The Old Man looked less...old. More like he appeared to Mac when they first met over twenty years ago, upon Mac's arrival at Dominatus following his release from prison.

“Hello Mr. Meyer. I've missed the hell out of you.”

They were sitting at a table in Mac's own Freedom Tavern, the home and business where Mac later explained to Reese he spent the happiest and most gratifying years of his life. A familiar, swirling, rich smelling cloud of cigar smoke hung over the Old Man as his

kind eyes looked back at Mac with open appreciation.

“I know you have Mac.”

Over the years, and in his interview with Reese just days before the drone bombing of Dominatus, Mac Walker had explained it was Alexander Meyer who had saved his life. The Old Man had given Mac the opportunity to live in Dominatus away from the oppressive mandates of the New United Nations, away from the political operatives of the Consul who would wish to have his knowledge of the events in Benghazi permanently silenced.

Mac arrived in Dominatus still enraged over his treatment at the hands of his own government, the false charges of race-motivated murder, followed by years of imprisonment – a seemingly limitless supply of resentment and distrust of all things had been built up inside the former Navy SEAL. Alexander Meyer had taken that broken and fractured man who Mackenzie Walker once was, and over time, gave him back both purpose and self respect, a gift Mac remained eternally grateful for.

“I’m dying Mr. Meyer. That day in the snow, just outside my tavern here in Dominatus, August Hess injected me

with a cancer. It's killing me, and there's nothing I can do about it. I'm so weak now. Can't hardly breathe, always tired. My thoughts get...fogged up. I hate being this weak. I hate other people looking at me with pity in their eyes."

The Old Man's brow furrowed as he took a long draw from his cigar, the smoke momentarily hiding much of his face.

"You're getting a taste of how I felt Mac – for years! It's not so bad having people worry over you, is it? You must have done something right for them to do so. I can recall you looking over at me with pity many times young man,

especially in the last few years of my own life.”

Mac had to smile at being addressed as a young man.

“Did I?”

Alexander Meyer nodded.

“Oh yes, you all did. And for good reason – I was a very old man! So old in fact, it became my title as much or more than my actual name!”

“Did that ever bother you? Being called the Old Man?”

Alexander Meyer smiled back at Mac, the light in his eyes dancing happily for a brief second.

“No, not really. I knew I was loved, respected, cared for. There is no shame in that. I had lived a very long time - suffered much, celebrated more. It was, despite the darker moments, a very-very good life.”

The Old Man leaned across the table toward Mac, his right hand coming to rest on Mac's left hand as his face grew very serious.

‘So tell me Mac, how are you feeling about your own life?’

Mac looked down at the Old Man's hand as he contemplated the question.

“I feel...I feel like it's running out, and I don't like it. Not one damn bit. I hate losing, and I know that is what's happening to my body right now. It's losing.”

The Old Man removed his hand from Mac's as he moved back into his chair.

“Growing old is inevitable Mac. Death is inevitable. A body is not meant to go on forever, as much as we would like it to. There's your soul though, the life beyond life.”

Mac's face contorted in disgust as he looked away from the Old Man.

“Ah, don't go talking all that bullshit Mr. Meyer. I ain't interested in hearing it. And don't think I'm so far gone already that I don't know these dreams are just me having a conversation with myself inside my own head.”

Alexander Meyer folded his hands on the table in front of him while staring back at Mac for several seconds.

“You don't think I'm really here? That this doesn't exist? That I don't exist?”

Mac was growing angrier, struggling not to shout back at the Old Man.

“You’re just a memory in my head! And when I’m gone, so is the memory! I’ll be gone. You’re already gone. That’s just the way it is. There’s no God. This world is far too fucked up for me to believe in something like that - that there is some kind of “thing” out there somewhere responsible for all this shit. Maybe a long time ago I’d have considered it, but I’ve seen too much. I’ve done too much. I’m not a stupid kid anymore. Sorry Mr. Meyer, but you’re dead. I watched you die in your bed. Watched you take your last breath. Buried you in the ground. You don’t

exist anymore. Just a voice in my head. Just me talking to myself.”

The Old Man smiled back at Mac, though his eyes betrayed a deep sadness.

“Mac, please listen to me. I need you to prepare. I need you to be right when your moment comes. That body of yours is dying, but there’s so much more beyond that tired and broken shell. You’re a good man Mac. One of the finest and noblest men I ever had the pleasure to know. You have protected so many for so long, I am now asking that you consider the possibility of the need to protect you from yourself, from your own arrogance and ignorance.

Time is running out Mac, and you must be prepared, otherwise your guilt and your dissatisfactions will permanently corrupt this new beginning - this beginning of a new beginning.”

Mac’s composure finally broke, causing him to do something he had never done before. He shouted back in anger at Alexander Meyer.

“Shut up with that shit! I don’t need your spiritual nonsense! I was born, and I lived, and now I’m gonna die! Not a damn thing to be done about it! That fucking Hess jabbed me full of this cancer. If there’s some God out there, why the hell did He let him do that?

Why'd He let the globalists destroy America? How about all those people killed by the drones? Seems to me that in this world, evil is rewarded while no good deed goes unfucking punished! So fuck God. And fuck you too. Get the hell out of my bar! Get the hell out of my fucking head!"

Mac Walker woke inside the passenger car of the moving train, the darkness outside passing silently by the window next to his seat. He sensed the train was moving very fast now, speeding down the tracks toward their destination in Churchill, Manitoba, to the priest and the hoped for weapon that would help destroy the New United Nations.

His lungs struggled to take in air, the sound of his wheezing enough to make Mac fear he would wake the others. He could feel his heart working harder and harder as it attempted to function with the diminished levels of oxygen in his body.

A wave of guilt washed over Mac. Even though he remained convinced it was merely a dream, he was shocked at how he had spoken with such disrespect to the memory of the Old Man, and found himself whispering a silent apology to that memory. Brando raised his head from the floor near Mac's feet, the Doberman's eyes seemingly full of

concern for the dying former soldier.

Mac shook his head at the silly thought. Brando was a hell of a dog to be sure, but he was just a dog. He wasn't capable of human feeling anymore than the universe was capable of having some god out there watching over everything and everyone. People tended to just believe what they wanted to believe.

Leaning down so that his face was close enough to Brando's that the Doberman was able to gently lick his left cheek, Mac found himself whispering softly back to the dog.

"That don't mean I ain't grateful to you

Brando. Glad to have you on my side. As bad as I'm feeling right now, I need all the help I can get."

Brando's eyes locked with Mac's, and for a brief moment, the dying man would have sworn he heard the voice of the Old Man calling out from somewhere in the darkness.

"I need you to be right when your moment comes Mac..."

XLVI.

Dublin woke just in time to see the train

speed past a small metallic white sign with black lettering placed on the side of the tracks that simply read, **MANITOBA.**

“Reese, wake up. We’ve just entered the Manitoba province.”

Reese stirred beside her, his eyes still half closed. They had been sleeping for nearly ten hours as the Russian pushed his beloved train to its limits. At that time, they were travelling at nearly seventy miles an hour.

Over the next few hours Dublin and the others watched as the Manitoba landscape changed from an almost lush

green, to increasingly snow covered ground. At one point, the train slowed its progress considerably as the Russian pushed through a snow bank that had settled over the tracks. When the train nearly halted, the group inside of the passenger car could hear Yakov utilizing his flame thrower to blast through the section of snow and ice before the train once again moved forward with increasing speed.

Cooper Wyse took a seat across from Dublin and Reese, his eyes gazing out across the ever growing, snow dominated terrain outside.

“Wonder if we’ll see some polar

bears?”

Reese's eyes opened wide at Cooper's mentioning of polar bears.

“What? Polar bears?”

The rancher nodded as he looked back toward the window.

“I read something about it a long time ago. They called Churchill the polar bear capital of the world, or something along those lines anyway. Run wild all over the area. Lots of bears and one hell of a light show too. The northern lights. They used to run tourist trips up that way years back. Bunch of silly hippies from

the city wanting to be one with nature, or whatever it was that motivated those people.”

Reese tipped his head toward Dublin.

“Like Dublin? She was a New Yorker. Likes to grow plants. Definite hippie material right here.”

Dublin’s mouth opened in mock outrage.

“Whatever Florida boy.”

Mac unleashed a harsh bout of coughing, causing his face to turn red as he fought to take a complete breath. The only thing he could produce was a series of

strained gasps until finally, the coughing subsided.

Dublin rose from her seat to sit next to Mac, wrapping her arms around his shoulders. She silently noted how much more frail he felt. He was also shivering. Placing a hand on his forehead, Dublin was shocked to at how cool, almost cold, Mac's skin felt.

“I shouldn't have yelled at him like that. Never...done that before. Wasn't right of me to act that way. I owe him so much. Wasn't right of me...”

Dublin squeezed her arms more tightly around Mac to try and warm him up.

“It’s ok Mac. I’m here. You’re sleeping on the train. We’re almost to Churchill now Mac. Almost there.”

Mac’s eyes opened halfway as he looked up at Dublin, a small smile creeping across his deeply lined face. The smile quickly disappeared as Mac awoke more fully and he attempted to sit up and push himself away from Dublin.

“Oh dammit, no!”

Mac looked over to where the others were sitting, grateful it appeared they had not overheard. Not wanting to look back at Dublin, Mac felt a great shame

welling up inside of him. So much shame he could feel tears forming in the corners of his eyes.

Dublin reached a hand out to him and leaned in, sensing something was troubling Mac terribly.

“Mac – what is it? What’s wrong?”

Still unable to meet Dublin’s gaze, Mac quickly wiped the tears away from his eyes. Finally he looked back at her, his mouth curled downward as he fought the urge to start sobbing.

“I pissed myself Dublin. Couldn’t stop it. It just happened. I...I fucking pissed

myself.”

Dublin drew herself closer to Mac, again wrapping her arms around him.

“Sshhhh, it’s ok Mac. It’s ok. There’s a bathroom in here, remember? You can go in and clean yourself up. It’s fine. Really. I won’t tell.”

Dublin felt Mac stiffen at her words. He again leaned back away from her.

“That won’t be necessary Dublin. I don’t need you covering for me.”

The familiar determination had returned to Mac’s face as he slowly stood up to

face Reese and Cooper, a small groan escaping him from the effort.

“Just want to let you two know – I just pissed myself. Ok?”

Reese looked back at Mac and tried to smile, but wasn't quite able to pull it off.

“That's ok Mac. No big deal.”

Mac glanced over at Cooper Wyse, who appeared bored by Mac's admission of losing control of his bladder.

“Hell Mac, look on the bright side.”

Mac frowned back at the rancher, not

sure what positive could be found in one urinating all over themselves.

“And what bright side would that be Coop?”

Cooper flashed a wide smile.

“You didn’t shit yourself – got that going for you.”

Mac stood there silent for a brief moment before he broke out laughing, finally allowing the tears to stream down his face.

It would be the last time anyone would ever hear Mac Walker laugh.

In the locomotive, Yakov pulled the train's whistle as they sped past another trackside sign that read, **CHURCHILL STATION – 120 KILOMETERS**

As Mac made his way slowly into the passenger car's small bathroom facility, he again heard the calm, assured voice of the Old Man speaking to him.

“Open your heart and listen to the words of the priest. You're almost there now.”

XLVII.

The final stretch to Churchill proved increasingly uncomfortable for those inside the passenger car. The tracks leading to the outpost had not been used for years, and were clearly suffering from various degrees of neglect, causing the train itself to vibrate violently as it made its way closer to Churchill, slowing the speed of travel considerably.

Outside, large areas of snow and ice were disrupted by smaller areas of green, grass covered knolls and the occasional dark green spruce tree. To the east of the tracks were the massive blue waters of the Hudson Bay. Although it was just mid-afternoon, the

sky was already turning toward darkness.

Mac, Dublin, Cooper, and Reese were suddenly thrown forward in their seats. Mac actually fell onto the floor, while the others were able to catch themselves before doing the same. A series of increasingly strong vibrations rumbled directly underneath them as the entire train lurched sharply to the left before coming to an abrupt halt.

Dublin and Reese helped Mac to his feet while the sound of the Russian cursing loudly from outside made its way down the train and into the passenger car. Cooper Wyse looked outside and then

back to the others.

“Jumped the track. Looks like we might be walking the last part there.”

Mac was making his way toward the exit door as Dublin's eyes watched his progress. She knew Mac was likely no longer capable of walking any distance.

Standing outside, the temperature felt to be near freezing, causing all of them to bundle their coats around them more tightly. Mac was clearly determined to not appear uncomfortable, walking as quickly as he could toward Yakov and Bear, who both stood just outside the locomotive's cab.

“What happened Yakov?”

The Russian watched as Mac came toward him, and then raised his arms out from his sides.

“What happened is shit tracks make train run off. Lucky to be going slowly when it happened. Going to take long time to move train back onto track.”

Mac looked over at the front of the locomotive, noting how it was tipping slightly to its left side.

“How long is a long time, Yakov?”

The Russian began to stroke the remaining portion of the beard that the seeker had not torn off, as he muttered to himself in Russian.

“Need at least half a day. Maybe longer.”

Reese was directly behind Mac and overheard Yakov’s timeline.

“We’re only about five or six miles from Churchill. How about we just start walking down the tracks on our own? Maybe there’s equipment there to help move the train back? That would be better than sitting still around here, right? Shouldn’t take us more than two,

maybe three hours to get to Churchill on foot. Mac, what was it that Calhoun said to look for when we get there?”

Mac was staring down the tracks when he answered Reese.

“The church – he said to look for the church.”

The Russian nodded at Reese’s suggestion to walk the remaining way.

“Ok – we go.”

Cooper interjected.

“Hold up. Gonna be dark in less than

two hours. Like I told Reese earlier, this is polar bear country. Supposed to be lots of them up this way - wolves too. We would be better off bunking in the passenger car for the night, and then heading out at first light.”

Mac paused to consider Cooper’s suggestion. Before he responded, Bear raised his own question.

“Didn’t Cahloun say he needed us to locate the priest ASAP? Within twenty four hours?”

Cooper indicated agreement with Bear on that point, but continued with his suggestion they not travel out in the open

at night.

“We made good time today, if we leave at first light, we’ll still be close to meeting that deadline.”

Brando cocked his head to the side as the howl of a wolf broke across the landscape, followed by several more howls from the direction they intended to travel into Churchill.

Whether it was the sound of the wolves, or something else, Mac had made up his mind.

“We stay here tonight, then go out in the morning, just like Coop said. I want one

of us up at all times keeping guard. I'll take first shift. We had to have put a lot of distance between ourselves and those seekers, but I don't want to risk being caught by surprise by them or anything else out there."

Nobody disputed Mac's instructions, as each of them made their way silently back into the train's passenger car.

The group sat down to a brief meal of dried fruit and water. Once again, Mac ate or drank very little. As the others settled down to try and sleep, he sat in a corner of the train car by himself, a loaded shotgun sitting across his lap. The pain in his lower back had returned

with a vengeance, causing him to have to constantly re-adjust his position in his seat.

Just put the barrel of that gun under your chin and pull the trigger Mac. No need to suffer anymore. Don't be a burden on everyone else. One little tug and it's all done. Might leave a little mess for them to clean up, but they'll be able to move a lot faster without you. They'll be safer without you.

Mac recognized the voice. It was August Hess, the man who had injected him with the deadly, untreatable cancer. He wasn't sleeping though. He couldn't be dreaming. How could he be hearing

Hess's voice, a man who he had watched die over two years ago?

Don't bother worrying about that Mac. Just focus on the pain. It will only get worse. And your lungs. They are just about used up. Pretty soon you won't be able to breath at all. Like drowning inside your own body. Why put yourself through that Mac? Why put your friends through that? Just pull the trigger. Let it all go and be done with it.

Mac blinked his eyes several times and then shook his head from side to side while attempting to take several deep breaths. He had to be asleep. Either he

was asleep or he was losing his mind – possibly both.

Stop trying to figure things out Mac. Sometimes you just have to accept what is, and what is for you right now, is a miserable, painful, suffering burden of an existence. So man up and pull that trigger. End it. Do it Mac! Do it while they are sleeping!

The weight of the shotgun felt good in his hands. It would be an easy enough thing. Simply place the butt of the gun on the floor, rest his chin at the end of the barrel, and reach a hand down to the trigger and pull. He wouldn't feel a thing. Just darkness, a release, and an

end to his suffering. More importantly, Mac wouldn't be a burden to the others. His condition wouldn't put them in more danger.

Mac watched his hands slowly place the end of the shotgun on the floor and then felt hard, cold steel as he placed his chin firmly atop the double barrel tip. Just one little flick of his finger and he could rest. Rest for good.

Yes! That's right Mac. You're so tired. Do it Mac! Pull the trigger! Do it now! Do it!

Mac closed his eyes tightly, his lower back screaming in pain, his breath

issuing in and out of his destroyed lungs in a series of shallow, rasping wheezes. It really would be so much easier.

“Fuck it.”

XLVIII.

The light nearly blinded Mac as he stood up in an attempt to see where it was coming from. He cried out in shock as he saw what appeared to be a massive cross coming from the center of the light.

I must be dead, and looks like I was wrong about the whole no God thing...

Mac blinked his eyes several times as Bear shouted out from behind him. The cross had disappeared, though the light remained.

“Who is that Mac? Can you see?”

Bear stood next to Mac, his right hand over his eyes as he too peered into the brilliant glare pouring through the train car windows.

Then darkness returned.

Outside the passenger car, the sound of a heavy vehicle door closing echoed in the night, followed by footsteps slowly

coming toward the back of the train.

“Hello! Is this the group from Alaska?”

The accent was unmistakably Middle Eastern. Mac held the shotgun in front of him, fearing they had possibly been followed all the way to Churchill by another group of Muslim bandits.

“Everyone get back from that door. Get back and get yourselves low. Coop, you still have some ammo left in those revolvers, right?”

Cooper’s voice replied in an almost whisper.

“Yeah Mac – already have them out and ready.”

The voice from outside yelled to them once again.

“Hello! I am here to take you to The Reverend Father! Is anyone here? Are you ok?”

Mac stifled a cough and then looked back to the others inside the train car.

“Wait here.”

Before Mac reached the exit door, someone began knocking on it from the outside.

“Hello? Is anyone in there? You do not need to fear me – I am here to help!”

Mac positioned himself against the far wall, just next to the door’s opening while Cooper Wyse crouched down behind a seat, one of his Colt revolvers pointed toward the back of the passenger car.

“Go ahead and come in.”

A silent pause greeted Mac’s instructions. Clearing his throat, Mac repeated himself.

“I said come on in!”

The door slowly opened outward, as the outline of an average sized man filled the void. Mac inched closer to where the man stood.

\

“Ok, that’s far enough. Stay right there. Keep your hands real still. Somebody light up a lantern so we can get a good look at our guest here.”

Dublin reached up and struck a match, lighting one of the two interior lanterns inside the passenger car, a warm glow pushing back against the darkness and revealing the young, friendly face of a thin, dark haired man who was smiling back at her.

“Hello. My name is Khalid. I work with The Reverend Father. You know him as the priest. I was told to investigate the noise we heard earlier, that it may have been your arrival. I was to ensure you were uninjured, and transport you back to the church if need be.”

Though Khalid’s accent was noticeable, his English was excellent, and he spoke as one who had received considerable education during his life.

Mac moved behind Khalid, placing the barrel of the shotgun against his back.

“Hello there Khalid. My name’s Mac. We are the group from Alaska. Can you tell me a little about why we are here?”

Khalid stood unmoving, and though the smile had fallen from his face as he felt the gun at his back, Khalid remained calm, his soft voice measured and deliberate as it spoke.

“You are here for the weapon, for the hopeful destruction of the New United Nations.”

Both Bear and the Russian walked toward Khalid, looking the smaller man up and down carefully. As they did so, Mac posed yet another question to him.

“And who sent us here?”

Khalid began to turn around to answer Mac, but a jab of the shotgun barrel against his back froze Khalid in place.

“That would be the Texas Resistance. They contacted you as they had nobody available or with the ability to bypass the border and make their way here to Churchill. Your location in the newly freed Alaska allowed the opportunity to travel here and secure the weapon.”

Mac pressed Khalid again.

“And how do you know this?”

Khalid looked back at Bear and the Russian, whose eyes were locked with his own.

“The Reverend Father, the priest...he told me.”

Bear took another step toward Khalid.

“And why would he do that? What’s your purpose here?”

Khalid continued to meet Bear’s gaze, giving no indication of being intimidated.

“I’m the weapon you seek. I’m the key

to destroying the New United Nations.”

Cooper Wyse rose slowly from his position behind one of the train car seats, glancing at Khalid and to Mac. Brando sat silently next to the rancher, seemingly uninterested in the new visitor.

“Care to explain how that is Khalid? How are you the weapon?”

Khalid gave a subtle grin in response to Cooper’s question.

“That will be explained to you in detail at the church. We should be going now. I don’t wish to worry The Reverend

Father. Please...let us go. I have a vehicle outside, large enough for all of you. We can be to the church in a mere minutes.”

Like Bear, Yakov had stepped closer to Khalid, his face revealing his continued distrust at the man’s arrival.

“You sound like Muslim. Yes?”

Khalid calmly looked back at the Russian and nodded.

“Yes, I am a Muslim. That is my faith.”

Yakov was now just inches from Khalid’s face.

“And why would Muslim work with priest? Your people destroyed Catholic Church. Your people beheaded many priests.”

Again Khalid nodded.

“Yes, that did happen. Those were not my people though. They do not follow my faith. Not honestly. They are an abomination to that faith.”

The Russian pointed a large finger at Khalid.

“I don’t like him! No! Not one bit! Muslim dog!”

Yakov spit on the floor of the train car, the liquid projectile landing just in front of Khalid's feet.

Reese stepped between the Russian and Khalid, while also looking at Mac who continued to hold the shotgun against Khalid's back.

“Our goal is to get to the priest. Khalid says he can take us to him. I say we stop stalling and do it. We're running out of time.”

Dublin joined with Reese's suggestion.

“Reese is right. If we have a way to get

to the priest now, we should do it. Let's go."

Cooper was the next to suggest the same.

"I'm with them Mac. Let's roll. Better than waiting 'till morning to head out. I'm guessing they have food, water, maybe medical supplies at the church?"

Khalid nodded several times.

"Oh yes! Places to sleep. Food and water. Shower facilities if you wish to clean up."

Perhaps it was the thought of a hot shower that finally pushed Mac's

concerns aside. He lowered the shotgun and nodded toward the exit door.

“Ok then...take what you can, and let’s go.”

XLIX.

As promised, the ride back to the church took but a few minutes. Khalid’s vehicle was an older commercial sized van with a snow plow shovel jutting out from its front hood and bumper. The rear tires were heavily studded, allowing the van to easily navigate the snow and ice covered roads of

Churchill, but making the ride a rather noisy and uncomfortable one.

None of the van's occupants said anything to each other during the short trip. Mac had positioned himself directly behind Khalid, the shotgun sitting against the back of the driver's seat. Churchill appeared to be deserted. What few buildings the van passed were dark. There were no street lights, no other vehicles, no signs of life. Khalid pointed to a small digital temperature display on the van's dash.

“Almost October! The snows will be coming again soon. The Reverend Father says it will be a particularly cold

winter this year.”

The Russian, who had insisted he sit next to Khalid so he could keep an eye on him, snorted loudly at the attempted small talk.

“Just shut up and drive shit van.”

Khalid turned right onto a narrow gravel road that rose upward onto a small hill on top of which the van’s headlights revealed a large, white painted church. A narrow steeple jutted upward from the left side of the church’s roof, capped by a large wooden cross.

A faint shimmer of light from inside the

structure could be seen through the large, stained glass windows of the chapel. Mac and the others peered into the darkness, trying to make certain they were not being led into some kind of trap. As the van slowed, nearing what appeared to be the parking area directly in front of the church entrance, the large double doors of that same entrance were pushed open, and out walked the tallest human being Mac or the others had ever seen. Yakov's mouth dropped open as his eyes grew wide, his mind attempting to comprehend how tall the priest appeared to be. From the back seat of the van, Cooper Wyse was heard muttering to himself.

“Holy shit.”

Khalid grinned as he looked back at Cooper in the rear view mirror.

“Yes – the Reverend Father is a unique man in many ways, his stature being among them.”

As the group exited the van, the priest made his way slowly down the steps of the church entrance. Mac noted the man appeared to be hobbling slightly, and was using a long thick staff to assist his movement. Khalid walked quickly toward the priest and extended his hand to help the man he addressed as The Reverend Father, down the last step and

onto the cold ground.

The priest was dressed in a very simple, long dark robe made from a thick, woolen material suitable for the often frigid temperatures of Manitoba. The sleeves hid his hands, while the bottom of the robe just touched the ground below the priest's dark shod feet. The Reverend Father's dark, nearly shoulder length hair framed a lightly bearded, wide face with a particularly prominent forehead. He appeared to be around forty years of age, with especially deep set dark eyes residing just below a large brow. Even as his back and shoulders slumped forward when he walked, the top of the priest's head reached nearly

seven and a half feet in height.

Mac was the first to step in front of the priest, looking up at the man they had journeyed so far to see. Before Mac could introduce himself, the deep baritone, French-accented voice of the priest addressed him and the others first.

“Welcome to Churchill. I am The Reverend Father Riel. This church is a sanctuary to all seeking safety from the dangers of the godless globalists. You are now safe and in God’s loving hands, for this is His home as much as it is ours.”

Father Riel then looked directly at Mac

and extended an incredibly long hand and fingers crippled and bent by arthritis.

“And welcome to you Mackenzie Walker, defender of Dominatus. It is both an honor and a pleasure to meet you.”

Mac quickly extended his right hand. Father Riel's grip was light, but also warm and comforting. Mac made certain to keep his own grip light as well, not wanting to cause pain to the man's contorted, arthritic fingers.

“Please everyone, come inside from the cold. We have food and drink, and after

we talk, warm beds for you to rest in.”

The priest leaned heavily on his staff as he made his way slowly back to the church doors, the effort causing him to grunt softly as he went back up each of the steps.

Several candles were burning inside of the small chapel. Six rows of dark wood benches lined both sides of the room, with a space between those benches extending down the middle, ending at a small altar area that was on the opposite end of the church. As the priest crossed the doorway's threshold, he paused in front of a small stone bowl that sat atop a matching pedestal. The

stone was half filled with what appeared to be clear water.

Father Riel paused next to the pedestal and quickly dipped the tips of his right fingers into the water, then just as quickly made the sign of the cross, before continuing to make his way toward the other end of the church. Mac looked to his left to see Cooper Wyse following the priest's example, as he too wet his fingers in the water and crossed himself. Seeing Mac staring at him, the rancher gave a small shrug.

“Reminds me of my mother.”

The group then followed behind the

priest and Khalid as they opened a door into another part of the church building. The second room was lower ceilinged than the chapel area. A simple long wooden table with matching chairs sat in the middle, and in the far left corner was an equally simple kitchen - an old wood burning cooking stove, and an ice box.

The floors were the same as the chapel, a wide planked wood, aged a deep brown. The walls were painted a simple cream white, with two small windows that looked out toward what was once the main outpost of Churchill, an area now neglected by years of abandonment.

Though they had eaten a small meal just a few hours earlier, all but Mac felt their stomachs wake up to the scents of whatever had been cooking in the kitchen. Khalid motioned for the group to take a seat at the table before making his way to the wood burning stove.

From the small oven compartment, he brought out a pan filled with several baked trout covered lightly in nothing more than salt and pepper. Plates were placed in front of each of the group, as well as a fork, and a glass of water.

The priest slowly lowered himself into a chair at the end of the table, his incredibly long legs stretched out to the

left side as his arms rested on the table's edge.

“The fish is freshly caught this morning from a stream that a hundred yards or so from here. Khalid has transformed himself into something of a fisherman since he arrived. While there is not enough to fully satisfy your hunger, hopefully it will lessen it.”

Mac picked at a small piece of fish while looking back at Father Riel.

“And how long has Khalid been here Father?”

The priest looked at Mac and then to

Khalid.

“Thirty four days. Tomorrow will make thirty five.”

As the others hungrily devoured their fish, Mac continued to press for more information.

“And what about you Father? How long has this place been your home?”

Father Riel folded his twisted hands together on top of the table and closed his eyes for a moment before answering.

“I have been the Church’s representative in Churchill for nearly twelve years

now, by way of Ontario. That was when...when the Muslims took over the city, took over much of Canada, as you already know. Soon after, they burned every one of our churches, and in some cases, with many Catholics still inside of them. I knew of Churchill, having spent a summer missionary here in my youth. So I fled Ontario and came here, and have remained in this place ever since.”

“Getting out of Ontario must not have been easy, especially someone who looks like you.”

The priest opened his hands and nodded at Mac’s remark.

“True, I was certainly well known by then. My size made anonymity near impossible. There was so much chaos in Ontario then, that running away proved simpler than one might now believe. And God of course, guided my way. He protected me, as He has, it would seem, protected all of you.”

“So what about this weapon? Khalid already told us he was the weapon. I’d like to hear you explain to us how that works. We’ve come a long way, and we don’t have the time for games or friendly chit-chat. I need to know what Khalid has, and how it can be used against the globalists.”

Khalid placed a chair next to the priest and sat down. He rested his arms atop the table and leaned forward, looking to each one in the group before beginning to speak.

“My full name is Khalid Al-Rashid, nephew to Prince Mishari Al-Rashid, of the House of Saud.”

Cooper Wyse let out a low whistle, while Mac uttered a just audible curse under his breath.

“Bullshit.”

Khalid heard Mac’s response, and

leaned further forward over the table.

“I assure you Mr. Walker, that I am who I say I am. There are thousands of members of the Saudi Royal Family. I am indeed one of those members.”

Mac glared back at Khalid, his doubt cutting through his words.

“Then what the hell are you doing hiding out here? And why would you be working to destroy the New United Nations. Your goddamn family IS the New United Nations!”

Khalid remained calm, seeming to expect Mac's distrust of his background

story.

“Yes, my family has been, and remains, the driving force behind the globalists. They have provided the resources, and the motivation, of the New United Nations since its inception. That is not to say all members of the family agree with this fact. There are some who have been quietly working to dismantle the globalist machine, to return the world to itself.”

Mac sat silent, processing what Khalid had just told them. He could feel the now all too familiar pain in his lower back flaring up again, though now it was also wrapping itself around both of his

hips.

“So what is this weapon? Get right to it. Explain it to us.”

Khalid rose from his chair.

“I will be right back. I will show you.”

Bear was eyeing the fish that remained uneaten on Mac’s plate.

‘Hey Mac – you mind?’

Mac glanced at Bear and then down to his plate.

“Oh...yeah, go ahead.”

Bear gratefully pulled the plate in front of him and devoured the remaining portion of baked trout.

Khalid returned to his chair holding a fist-sized, dark plastic box.

“This is it - a polymorphic viral distributor. All I need is a connection to a main frame application. Any application, and within seconds of uploading, the code will begin to multiply at an increasing rate, eventually crashing the entire system.”

Mac’s chin dropped toward his chest as he brought both hands to the sides of his

head.

“Are you fucking kidding me? We were sent out here for a goddamn computer virus? Tell me that isn’t what you’re talking about here. Because if you are...”

The priest raised his hand, indicating he wished to speak.

“Mac, please listen to what Khalid has to say. There is more to be explained – much more. This weapon is very real, if but given the opportunity to do its work. As you have just said, you travelled a very long way to be here. That alone suggests you allow Khalid the

opportunity to explain why the Texas Resistance deems this opportunity worthy of your help.”

Mac folded his arms across his chest and leaned back in his chair.

“Ok then Khalid, keep talking.”

Khalid opened the top of the small box, where a tangle of thin wires was pushed against the sides of the opening. To Mac it appeared to be no more than a homemade mess of nothing, but Khalid’s enthusiasm for what he thought the black box could do was apparent as he proceeded to explain further.

“I simply need a direct transmitter that feeds into the system main frame. Well...I say simply but that is our challenge of course. Initially, your contact with the Texas Resistance, Mr. Calhoun, believed this box needed to be in their possession in order to initiate the upload. That is not so. I could do it from here if we had a direct transmitter application. Something that uploads into the New United Nations’ system. If I had such an application, I would simply coordinate the viral distribution from that point. Simple.”

Mac’s arms remained folded as he shook his head.

“No, not simple, or you would have done that already. If I’m understanding you right, you’re telling us you need to get across the border, sneak into a government office, or maybe steal a compliance officer’s communications device, something along those lines, right?”

Khalid nodded in agreement.

“Yes! That is exactly right!”

Mac flinched slightly as a small explosion of pain erupted in his right hip. His jaw clenched tightly until the pain subsided.

“First, getting you across the border into the former United States is one hell of an issue, and given our last communications with the Texas Resistance, we don’t have the time. They’ll be dead and gone by then. Second, I’d like to know how in the hell you think you’ve developed some device, or program, or whatever you’re going on about here, that could somehow bypass all of the electronic protections I know for a fact the New United Nations has in place to prevent this kind of thing from happening.”

Khalid smiled back at Mac.

“I know this because I was among those who developed the latest anti-viral

system protections for the main frame that was initiated just six months ago. My name, my position within the Saudi Royal Family, allowed me that access. My expertise from years of study, gave me the ability to create the polymorphic virus. It will work. I am certain of it. I would in fact, wager my life on its success.”

Mac remained unconvinced.

“Maybe it works, maybe it don’t. Either way, like I said, we don’t have the time. How in the hell do we find you access to the main frame? We’re a thousand miles from any source like that. We’re literally sitting out here in the middle of

nowhere! That little black box of yours is worthless! This entire goddamn trip has been worthless! If this was Calhoun's plan, no wonder the Texas Resistance is getting their asses kicked! They're being led by a moron!"

Mac covered his mouth as he was racked by a series of deep coughs that caused him to cry out from the searing pain that enveloped his lungs. When the coughing finally subsided, Mac slowly rose up from his chair, waiving away Dublin as she attempted to help him stand.

The priest stood up as well, rising to his full height, towering over Mac as he

looked down at the former Navy SEAL with a mixture of hopeful sadness.

“God will provide us the means Mac. There comes a time when every one of us must be willing to believe in our own place within a far greater plan. For you, that time is now.”

Mac Walker sneered back at Father Riel, his hand again slamming down against the table.

“To hell with your god! I’m dying over here! I dragged my dying ass to this piece of shit place – for nothing! We got no plan! That’s it! Nothing! You want to stand there and tell me how God will

provide? How about He takes this cancer out of my lungs? How about He flies us on out to wherever we can go so Khalid can hook up that goddamn little toy box of his? How about He fixes those messed up crippled fingers of yours? How about He brings back all the poor bastards this government has killed off? How about it priest? Where is your god in any of that? Tell me! Tell me, because I would sure like to know!”

The tip of Father Riel’s staff hit Mac in the middle of his chest with enough force to send him crashing onto the floor, putting him on his back struggling for breath. The speed at which it happened left the others at the table momentarily

stunned before Bear bolted from his chair to confront the priest.

‘What the hell you think you’re doing!’

Again Father Riel’s staff struck with both incredible force and speed, this time halting Bear’s progress as it stuck him in the side of the head, causing Bear’s eyes to momentarily lose focus. Reese was the next to charge the priest, though he made it only halfway down the table before his legs were swept out from beneath him, sending him crashing to the floor as well.

The Russian rose from his chair and prepared to turn the large table over onto

the priest's legs, but he too failed to follow the speed of Father Riel's staff as it descended onto the top of his head, making him cry out in pain and stumble backwards, eventually tripping over Mac's still prone body.

That left only Dublin and Cooper Wyse still sitting in their seats. Dublin moved slowly to where Reese lay, while Cooper, with Brando sitting quietly next to him, stared calmly back at both Khalid and the priest. Unseen to them were the two revolvers the rancher held pointed at them from underneath the table.

“Hey now, no need for this to go real

bad real quick. Emotions are running a bit high for everyone. I'm gonna just keep on sitting here and wait for all you to do the same so we can have a more reasonable conversation with one another. That sound ok with you Father Riel?"

Bear was helping Mac to his feet, while the Russian appeared ready to try and charge the priest again. Dublin and Reese were already returning to their own seats. Yakov turned to Mac while pointing back to Khalid and Father Riel.

"You want me to kill them now? Break that damn stick up your ass, priest."

Mac waived the Russian away, as he slowly returned to his chair, his breath still coming in short, rattling, gasps.

“No...I wasn’t acting right. I apologize, Father Riel and Khalid. My head, I’m not myself, letting my own fear and frustration take the place of good manners. That said, goddamn if that walking stick of yours don’t pack a hell of a punch! Everyone, please, let’s sit back down here and think this through. I’m sorry again for my...outburst. It was disrespectful. Please, accept my apologies.”

The priest allowed a small smile to sneak across his face, as he looked over

at Mac with a newfound respect. To witness a man as proud as Mac Walker be so quickly willing to seek forgiveness for their actions, was something increasingly rare in a world gone empty of nearly all moral responsibility.

“I shall count that as your first confessional Mac. Welcome to the Church!”

Father Riel’s attempt at humor was met with stony silence until finally the Russian slapped his hands together and threw back his head and laughed.

“You make joke!”

Mac smiled back at the priest, glad to see the mood so quickly lightened following his outburst. Fatigue was again overtaking him, but he did not want to sleep, wanting instead to remain awake to experience whatever small moments remained in his life. Sleep was too much like death, and he had finally accepted he would be getting plenty of that soon enough.

L.

Early the following morning, before he thought any of the others were yet awake, Mac quietly moved into the

chapel room, taking one of the portable short wave units with him. He hoped to contact the Texas Resistance for an update.

Though his breathing remained more a wheezing back and forth of air coming and going in his lungs, interrupted by periods of increasingly painful coughing, Mac found that not having laid down to sleep left him actually feeling somewhat more refreshed. He remained dead tired to be sure – but not dead, and he found that an acceptable alternative.

The interior of the chapel was still a murky dark, the sun not yet risen enough to provide light through the large stained

glass windows. Mac sat down in one of the wooden benches and powered up the short wave, adjusting the frequency to the same one he had last spoken with Royce Calhoun on.

“This is Walker for Calhoun. Copy.”

Mac waited a full minute for a response that did not come before repeating the message.

“This is Walker for Calhoun. Copy.”

Again the shortwave remained silent.

Mac left the device on and placed it next to him on the bench, and then found

himself staring up at the life sized carving of Jesus Christ on the cross that hung directly over the altar area. As an example of artwork, Mac found the details and coloring of the carving impressive. The eyes of Christ looked back at Mac with the same weariness Mac had been feeling for days. The carving depicted an expression in Jesus of a man who knew his end was very near, and that it was his own people who had so willingly put him there.

“So why didn’t you just come on down from that cross? Smite all the bastards who did that to you? Son of God, right? Well if you had that kind of power, why didn’t you use it?”

Mac's voice echoed inside of the empty chapel, before fading to silence and leaving him to sit alone again in his own thoughts as a hint of daylight from outside began to creep across the floor.

“It is not for us to judge God Mac. To attempt understanding of something as vast and unending as the mind of God is the epitome of human arrogance, the very arrogance and pride that has been our downfall as human beings from inception.”

The voice startled Mac as he moved to jump up from the bench. The priest was already beside him, lowering himself

slowly next to Mac, leaning heavily against his staff as he did so.

Father Riel looked up to the Christ statue for a moment, and then closed his eyes.

“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.”

Mac’s response to the priest’s quoted Bible verse was immediate.

“You don’t give up, do you? I’m not interested in hearing that shit Father. I don’t want to be disrespectful here, I did enough of that last night, and I apologize

for that again, but those words mean absolutely nothing to me.”

Father Riel turned toward Mac, his words slow and deliberate, in the deep tones of a voice that seemed to originate from another time.

“You loved and respected Alexander Meyer, did you not? And was he not a man of great faith Mac? Despite all that had been taken from him, including his own daughter, his faith in God remained to the very end, correct?”

Mac focused on his breathing, and remaining calm under the weight of the priest’s persistence in trying to save his

non-existent soul. It was then Mac again heard the voice of the Old Man from his dream the night before.

I need you to be right when your moment comes Mac...

Turning to look at the priest, Mac nodded in agreement at Father Riel's description of Alexander Meyer's faith.

“Sure – he believed in God. A higher power...whatever.”

“And that belief never entered your own mind, Mac? You were never willing to consider the possibility of such a thing? That there could be something far greater

than our own incredibly brief and small lives?”

Mac’s hands were gripping the lip of the bench tightly as another wave of pain ran down his spine.

“No. Mr. Meyer was an honorable man. Yeah – I loved him and respected him. Did everything I could to protect him. The thing is though, we were all stuck in that cave, as the drone bombs dropped over our heads, because of how messed up this world has become. So where is God’s hand in all of that priest? When Dominatus was being attacked, I saw a woman, a mother of a young child, have an ice pick pushed

through her skull. I had friends killed because a government wanted to silence them for what they may or may not have known. After years of service to that same government, I was put in prison for doing nothing more than saving the life of a woman who was getting the shit beat out of her by a drugged up loser. And now I'm dying of this cancer that was injected into me by the same sadistic son-of-a-bitch who ran that ice pick through that poor woman's head. Where is your so-called God when all of that is happening?"

Father Riel slowly nodded his head, as he repositioned himself on the bench to allow his legs to more easily stretch out

into the aisle of the church.

“You have very valid questions Mac, questions I have in my own life asked of God. You’re in pain, both physically and spiritually. That is understandable. I too, know pain Mac. This body of mine...poses not insignificant challenge.”

The priest held up his hands to better show his grotesquely bent and arthritic fingers.

“I was diagnosed with a form of acromegaly at the age of ten. By fifteen I was nearly seven feet tall, and living in constant pain. My joints were terribly

inflamed from the accelerated growth. At eighteen I had an operation to remove a tumor that was growing within my pituitary gland, causing my body to produce much higher levels of growth hormone. For nearly two years following that operation, I was able to live relatively pain free. It was then I joined the Church. It was my belief the experience of knowing great physical pain would allow me insights into helping others going through similar pain.

Shortly after my twenty first birthday, I awoke sweating terribly, racked again with that same, all too familiar pain in my joints. The doctors confirmed

another tumor, but by then, the war on the Catholic Church was fully underway by the globalists, and access to medical services was denied me due to my affiliation with what the new government deemed a “business of false faith”. So, I lived my life as God had made it. I took the pain, the affliction, and grew stronger...spiritually stronger, from it. My hands, as you can see, pose my greatest challenge. Attempting to move my fingers even slightly feels as if I am immersing them in fire, so great is the discomfort.”

Mac interrupted the priest, his eyes staring at the just referenced abnormally long and disfigured fingers.

“And where is God in your suffering? If you have been forced to live your life in such pain, and to see all of those churches burned, and all of those people of faith persecuted by the globalists – why would God allow those things to happen?”

Father Riel looked back to the carved depiction of Christ’s suffering.

“Those examples are not of God. They are of us. We are responsible for them. God cannot provide absolute safety and security for the human race anymore than a parent can to a child. There are dangers inherent in all forms of

existence. Is that not one of the fundamental evils of the New United Nations? It has empowered itself with the promise of removing the dangers of existence. Tell people they need not worry over security, for that security will be provided them. Those people then give up freedom and liberty for that false sense of security. God grants each of us choice. If society has chosen to forsake God, to forsake freedom, to forsake liberty – who are we to judge God for our own mistake?”

Mac sat silently, considering the priest's words carefully, before finally whispering two brief words.

“I’m afraid.”

Father Riel placed his right hand on Mac’s shoulder.

“What do you fear Mac?”

Mac’s eyes locked with those of the Christ statue.

“Dying. I don’t want it. Death. I don’t want to go through it. I don’t want to leave these people behind. Thought I was brave. Thought I would...shit it sounds so stupid when I say it...thought I’d go out in some big, guns-a-blazing moment of glory. The truth is, I’m scared shitless. My body is dying, and I

don't have control of that situation, and it pisses me off. And I'm afraid. I mean, really, really afraid right now. I think maybe that's why I took this mission. If I'm being honest with myself, and I'm starting to realize I haven't been honest for a while now...I took this mission because I was running away from dying. Some stupid part of me figured as long as I was doing what I was trained to do, my body wouldn't give up. I'd keep living. I wouldn't have to...to face my own death."

The daylight coming through the chapel windows filled the room, rising up to illuminate the figure of Christ that hung from the wall. Father Riel gently

squeezed Mac's shoulder.

“Fear is part of being human Mac. For as tough a life as you've led, for as many missions you have accomplished, in the end, you remain a human being - weak, fallible, and always capable of dying. And while you may not wish to hear me say it, I know in my heart Mac, I feel it in every fiber of my being. Death is but a threshold across which you will walk. But you must be prepared to make that journey. You must be willing to accept that gift of life after life.”

Mac's eyes remained looking upon the depiction of Jesus, as he silently noted a shadow moving across both the statue

and the wall behind it. Turning his head to look toward the windows on the other side of the church, Mac found himself staring into the black eyes of a seeker, the space between them separated only by the thin layer of stained glass.

The creature's mouth opened wide, erupting in a screeching howl, likely signaling others of its location, before crashing its head through the church window as it prepared to launch itself toward Mac and Father Riel.

LI.

The Great Consulate giggled as he watched through the seeker's eyes the horror in the faces of the two men sitting inside the church as the seeker shattered the glass. In the corner of his killing room, the seeker the Great Consulate had strapped to the floor many days ago, sat looking back at him, making no sound or movement.

He was amazed at the clarity through which the sensory link transmitted the signal of the sights and sounds and smells being communicated directly from the seeker's brain all the way from that pathetic outpost in Manitoba. Why the Dominatus survivors had made their way remained a mystery to the Great

Consulate, but the chase to follow and find them had proven extremely entertaining, even if it came at some cost.

The seekers that had survived the attack against the moving train were pushed to the limits of their genetically enhanced physical capabilities to catch the travelling Dominatus interlopers. This required that during the hunt, some seekers attack and eat the weaker seekers in order to ensure the chase would continue. This killing of their own kind resulted in just ten seekers being left alive by the time the group reached Churchill.

Watching the two men scramble away from the window as his seeker plunged through it assured the Great Consulate that ten would be more than enough. They no longer were on the train, so escape on foot was impossible. The seekers were too fast, and were now motivated by starvation as well. They would kill the humans, and feast on their flesh. The Great Consulate licked his own cracked and diseased lips with a puss filled, blackened tongue, anticipating the joy he would feel in sharing that experience inside of the seeker's mind.

The Great Consulate watched as the much shorter and older of the two men

pushed the other behind him, in some kind of silly attempt at protection. That taller man wore a long dark robe. Could he possibly be a priest? Did such things still exist? Oh how marvelous it would be to watch, feel and taste the life of a priest bleeding out in front of him!

A metallic glint flashed from across the room. The older man carried a knife in his right hand, holding it out in front of him as he walked slowly backwards toward another door, still positioning himself between the seeker and the much taller, dark robed man.

Not wanting to give them yet another opportunity to escape, the seeker

crouched low against the wooden floors of the chapel and opened its mouth to expose its many jagged teeth before propelling its body toward the humans, closing the gap between them in a mere half second. The seeker hit the chest of the shorter man, knocking him off his feet and allowing the creature to clamp its jaws over the human's right shoulder. The seeker's excitement grew as it heard the man scream out, though at the same time feeling repeated jabs of pain from its side. It was the knife the man held in his hand being plunged repeatedly into the seeker's body.

Screeching its outrage, the seeker's jaws bit down harder on the man's shoulder.

The talon-tipped fingers of its left hand dug into the human's right forearm, ripping away the flesh, causing him to drop the knife. Feeling the man quickly getting weaker underneath him, the seeker opened its jaws again so it could close them over the human's exposed neck.

The Great Consulate was lost in a wave of excitement and pleasure. He heard, felt and tasted everything the seeker did. He sensed how the creature was now preparing to rip out the man's throat, a sensation that caused the Great Consulate to squeal with delight. This pleasure was soon replaced though by a crashing pain in his head as he found

himself looking up at the church ceiling, a wave of confusion and fear overcoming the seeker.

The creature scrambled to regain its feet, hissing a warning against the incredibly tall human that stood over him waving some kind of stick – the same stick this same man had just used to bash the top of the seeker's head. The man was tall, but the seeker sensed he was slow and struggling to maintain his balance.

Again the creature launched itself forward, its mouth closing on the tall man's upper right thigh, ripping through the woolen cloth of his robe and finding the predictably soft and pliant human

skin beneath. Already the tall man's blood filled the seeker's mouth as it hungrily ripped deeper into the flesh of his thigh.

The human fell to the floor, allowing the seeker to scramble onto his chest, digging its claws into the man's arms to hold them down. Still clutching the large stick, the priest held it across his chest, using it as a protective barrier between the seeker's snapping jaws and his own body.

Again and again the seeker closed its jaws over the stick, growing more enraged as its presence. Finally the man's grip loosened, and the stick fell to

the floor, eliciting a hungry and triumphant shriek from the seeker, a shriek cut short by the jaws of an attacking dog as it bit into the seeker's face.

The Great Consulate screamed in frustration and shared pain as he felt the dog's long canine teeth plunge into the seeker's chin and upper throat. Despite digging its claws into the dog's exposed belly, the seeker was unable to free itself from the animal's jaws. If anything, the dog's efforts became even more determined as it shook its head violently from side to side, its teeth working more deeply into the seeker's face and neck.

Finally the dog's grip lessened just enough to allow the seeker to open its mouth and bite down onto the back of the animal's neck while continuing to sink its claws more deeply into the dog's soft underside.

The Great Consulate clapped his hands together as he felt the Doberman's life force lessening, its belly ripped open, drenching the seeker in the animal's blood. The dog was dead. The humans were next.

It felt so good to kill.

And then the world went dark...

LII.

Cooper Wyse cradled Brando against his chest, knowing the wounds the Doberman suffered during its battle with the seeker were beyond repair. His best friend was dying. The rancher made no sound, but simply held the dog's head against his shoulder as he felt Brando's breathing become increasingly shallow and sporadic.

One final exhalation of breath, and Brando's body went limp as Cooper gently lay the dog back down onto the

church floor, tears running from the corners of his eyes.

Just ten feet from where the rancher knelt was the seeker, knocked unconscious by a powerful blow to its skull from the priest's staff. The rancher knew the creature yet lived because he could see blood still seeping from the wounds in its side put there by Mac's knife. The monster's heart still beat.

Standing up, Cooper unholstered the revolver from his right hip and pointed it down at the seeker's head.

“No! Cooper...don't kill it!”

Mac's voice halted the rancher's intent as he looked back toward the older man who remained lying on the floor, his breathing coming in a series of quick, short, rasps.

“That thing killed Brando, Mac. I'm not letting it live.”

Mac struggled to sit up, helped by both Reese and Dublin.

“I know that Coop, but we need that seeker alive. It has a transmitter. Remember what they showed us in Wilfrid - the box thing at the back of its neck?”

Khalid looked down at Mac and then to the priest before running past Mac to lean down beside the injured seeker. He rolled the creature over onto its stomach and felt the area behind its neck where the unmistakable outline of a small square box marked the dark, mottled skin.

“This is a transmitter?”

Mac was slowly rising to his feet, the wound from the seeker’s bite having soaked the right side of his shirt in blood.

“Yeah. It’s just under the skin, at the base of the brain stem. It’s a transmitter

and I'm pretty sure it sends information back to the main frame. These...things, their progress, location, it's all being monitored. But if it's dead, I don't know if the transmitter still works. So...we have to keep it alive. For now."

Dublin had turned her attention to helping the priest, whose bite wound on this thigh continued to produce an alarming amount of blood. Reese ran into the other room and then returned with several towels from the kitchen area, which Dublin proceeded to wrap tightly over the torn flesh of the priest's leg, hoping to stem the bleeding.

Father Riel, though pale and sweating

profusely from the attack and resulting wound to his leg, made certain to thank both Dublin and Reese for their help.

“I will be fine. The bleeding is already slowing. Thank you so much. Thank you. Please...see to Mac. He is in far worse condition than I am.”

Mac walked slowly toward the unconscious seeker, his left hand resting over the wound on his right shoulder.

“If that thing moves, bash its fucking head in.”

The Russian looked back at Mac and nodded.

“With pleasure.”

Khalid returned with the small wired box from yesterday and knelt beside the seeker, his hands again feeling around the outline at the back of the neck where the creature’s transmitter was to be located.

“I need to cut into it – have direct access to the device.”

Mac handed his knife to Bear with a trembling hand.

“You have to do it Bear, I’m worried I’ll fall over.”

Bear took Mac's knife and leaned over next to Khalid.

“Just tell me where.”

Khalid traced the area with his index finger, which Bear then followed with the knife, slicing through the seeker's tough, leathery skin. Once the cut was completed, Khalid had Bear pull back the skin, revealing the creature's transmitter.

The Saudi Muslim lowered his head to peer at the device, his eyes scanning over it in appreciation of its simple, but effective design.

“It’s appears to be integrated directly into the cerebellum. Some kind of neural communicator. It must take the neural signals and convert them into binary code which is then uploaded into the main frame, perhaps a form of synaptic integration. It’s a relatively simple device, but an ingenious application.”

“I could give a shit about all of that. Just tell us if it will work?”

Khalid paused as he considered Bear’s question, his eyes remaining fixated on the seeker’s transmitter.

“Yes, I think it’ll work. I’ll need some time to sync the two devices, but once that’s done, yes – I can upload the virus into the New United Nations’ mainframe.”

Mac placed a hand on Bear’s shoulder for support as he felt his knees wanting to buckle underneath him.

“How long Khalid? How long do you need?”

Khalid looked up at Mac.

“I should be ready to upload within the hour Mac.”

Mac Walker grunted softly and nodded his head.

“Good, I think I can keep breathing for at least that long. I want to hear confirmation this thing works. Before I die, I want to know we didn’t make this trip for nothing.”

Cooper Wyse slowly rose to his feet from where he had been cradling Brando on the church floor, and walked slowly to the window the seeker had broken through during its attack on Mac and the priest. His keen eyes narrowed as he looked out across the landscape and saw movement no more than a few hundred yards from the church entrance.

The remaining seekers were moving quickly, the sound of their shrieks signaling hungry and deadly intent.

LIII.

Cooper Wyse demanded to the others that he be the one to go outside and meet the seekers before they reached the church. Khalid needed more time to synch the system, and Cooper wanted to be the one to provide that time. He had six bullets remaining, three in each of his two revolvers. The Russian threw the rancher the shotgun as well, which

housed just one more shell.

Reese had quickly done the math, and didn't care for the odds.

“You don't have enough ammo Coop. You can't kill them all.”

Cooper held up Mac's knife that Bear had just handed him, and then slid the large blade in between his belt.

“There, now I'm good. Get out of my way Reese. I'm goin' out there.”

Reese put his right hand firmly against the rancher's chest, pushing back against him just enough to halt Cooper's

forward motion.

“We can all help Coop. Why do you want to go out there by yourself?”

Cooper Wyse looked up from under the brim of his hat, his lip curling into a snarl as he hissed back at Reese between clenched teeth.

“If they get past me, it’s up to you to give Khalid the time he needs to upload the virus. Plus...they killed my dog. This is personal Reese. I want to do this alone.”

Mac’s hand dropped onto Reese’s shoulder, pulling the younger man to the

side and allowing Cooper access to the door.

“Let him go Reese.”

Cooper pushed past Reese then paused as his hand rested on the door handle. The rancher looked back at the body of Brando, his eyes closing tightly for a brief moment before he opened the door and looked out across the landscape at the quickly approaching seekers.

His face betrayed no emotion, but the rancher's eyes shouted in thunder.

With the shotgun clasped tightly in his hands, Cooper Wyse jumped down from

the steps of the church and began running directly toward the seekers. The distance between them and him was no more than a hundred yards. The rancher's mind quickly noted there were nine of the creatures left.

Three seekers ran ahead of the others, their clawed hands and feet digging into the dirt beneath them, propelling them forward as they howled in anticipation of the impending kill. Cooper quickly dropped to his left knee, took a deep breath, and pointed the shotgun at the seeker who ran between the other two. He knew the timing was critical, needing to allow a great enough distance that the shotgun blast would hit all three seekers,

while also close enough to ensure they were hit with enough force to actually kill them.

Cooper took another breath, estimated the distance to be no more than thirty yards, and fired.

The middle seeker crumbled to the ground, rolling end over end before stopping completely. The creature on the right cried out as its right shoulder exploded in a shower of bone and blood, causing it to slow considerably. The last seeker on the left appeared unharmed, its mouth opening wider as it bore down on the still kneeling Cooper Wyse.

The rancher gripped the barrel of the shotgun and swung it around him like a baseball bat, smashing the butt of the gun into the forehead of the seeker, crunching fragments of skull that imbedded into the creature's brain. The seeker's momentum still carried the beast into Cooper, causing him to fall onto his back as the seeker's body covered his chest.

Cooper's right leg screamed in pain as another seeker's mouth bit into it. The rancher fired one of his revolvers, shooting a large hole through the creature's neck, causing the beast to bleed out in seconds. Cooper rolled to his side and onto his knees, his eyes

scanning where the next attack would come from, both hands gripping his beloved Colt revolvers.

Another seeker hit the rancher from behind, its jaws clamping down onto his right shoulder blade, its teeth scraping against bone. Cooper Wyse made no sound as he rose to his feet with the seeker still biting into his back, the thing's clawed hands and feet wrapping around him, digging into his flesh.

Two more seekers approached from the front, certain the rancher was now defeated. Cooper took aim, a revolver pointed at each of them, and simultaneously fired off two rounds.

Both shots found their mark, ripping through the right eyes of both seekers, killing them instantly.

That left two seekers remaining – the one still clamped onto Cooper's back, and the other with the injured shoulder that had survived the shotgun blast.

Cooper aimed both revolvers over his shoulder and fired. The gun in his left hand shot wide past the seeker's body. The other revolver's bullet skimmed the back of the seeker's skull, leaving a quarter inch groove along its path. Despite the wound, the seeker maintained its bite on Cooper's shoulder, its claws digging even deeper

into the rancher's body. Cooper could feel himself losing consciousness.

“You killed my dog!”

Cooper Wyse screamed the words as he fired two more shots over his shoulder. Both bullets ripped into the seeker's body, tearing flesh, ripping through a lung, and severing the spine. The creature fell from the rancher's back, leaving Cooper staring into the eyes of the final seeker. It was especially large, and unknown to Cooper, had been the first of the seekers to arrive at his ranch when the journey to Churchill had just begun.

The creature's injured shoulder caused its right arm to drag slightly behind its body as it slowly crept toward the rancher. Cooper, sensing his body rapidly weakening from the multiple wounds the other seekers had already inflicted on him, fought to keep his focus on the remaining seeker, though his vision began to fade as he struggled to hold both revolvers out in front of him.

“Come on then you ugly bastard, let's see what you got.”

The seeker issued a low, whining growl at Cooper, its head lifting up as it sniffed the air. Cooper noted how the creature acted more intelligent than the others of

its kind, perhaps sensing he still held loaded weapons in his hands, while also possibly sensing how close to passing out Cooper Wyse was.

The seeker, wary of being shot again, intended to wait it out, circling slowly around the human. The seeker's patience was soon rewarded as Cooper fell to his knees, and then tipped over onto his left side, his hands releasing their grip on the revolvers.

“Sorry Brando, didn't quite finish the job for you buddy.”

With the side of his head compressed against the cold Manitoba ground,

Cooper could see the bottom half of the seeker making its way slowly toward him, still showing caution, but growing more excited second by second as it became convinced its prey was now helpless. Finally it let out a triumphant shriek as it bounded into the air, its jaws spread wide in preparation of clamping down onto Cooper Wyse's face.

God, just make it fast – and don't give that thing the satisfaction of hearing me scream.

Cooper smiled as he thought of seeing his wife Arlene and their children again. Sometimes, back at the ranch, he would feel Arlene's presence as he rode

Licorice across the vast fields of the property. Some days it was a particularly warm and comforting breeze, while other days it might be a whisper from just behind his saddle. During those moments he would simply smile and send her a thought that he would be with her again soon.

It appeared that time had now arrived for Cooper Wyse.

LIV.

The bear's massive clawed paw pummeled the seeker as it attempted to

leap at Cooper. Just twenty minutes earlier, the seekers had come upon the mother polar bear's young cub, a cub that had become separated from its mother as she foraged several hundred yards away for food along the shores of Hudson Bay. The seekers, already starving from their journey across the former Canadian provinces, cornered the bear cub and attacked it, hoping to make it an easy meal.

The cub's panicked cries reached the ears of its mothers, sending her bounding across the frozen ground with an incredible amount of speed for something so large. The bear came upon the seekers as several of the creatures

were biting into her bear cub, attempting to rip it apart.

The mother bear dove into the group of seekers, her jaws clamping down over the head of one as her claws ripped apart another. The seekers scattered momentarily, but soon regrouped as the largest among them howled and hissed back at the bear. From a distance, the shrieking call of the seeker that was then preparing to plunge through the church window reached the ears of its fellow seekers, causing the group to turn and run in the direction of the call.

The polar bear cub had been gravely injured, its white fur covered in its own

blood. Its mother nudged its dying body, licking the many wounds and crying for her child to begin breathing again. The cub lay motionless on the icy ground, as the mother bear inhaled the smell of the seekers that covered the bear cub. Her sadness quickly turned to fury as she raised her great head and unleashed an enraged roar into the sky above her, before turning to follow the trail of the departed seekers.

It was that mother bear that now grasped the body of the last remaining seeker between her massive jaws and threw the monster into the air, then plunged herself forward to land on top of it, pinning the creature's body underneath her

incredibly powerful front paws.

Still the seeker fought back, grasping underneath the great bear's neck, attempting to dig its talons into its flesh. The polar bear's head lunged forward, its jaws snapping over the front of the seeker's face, ripping the flesh from its forehead.

Cooper Wyse watched the battle in stunned amazement, knowing that his life had just been saved by a bear that might likely kill him as soon as it finished with the seeker.

Maybe you should get moving then cowboy.

Cooper grinned when he heard the familiar voice – the voice of Arlene.

Stop grinning like an idiot. Get up Cooper. Get up and move - NOW.

Cooper Wyse rolled onto his stomach and attempted to push himself up onto his knees. His arms buckled beneath him, sending his face crashing back onto the ground.

Cooper, I don't want to see you yet. You have a lot more to do in this life. People you haven't even met before are going to need you very much. A whole lot of people, so you stand up and

walk. If you ever loved me Cooper Wyse, you'll get up right now.

The rancher wasn't sure how it happened, but one moment he was lying on the ground, and his next memory was of him standing on his feet and looking back at the polar bear as it continued to rip apart the seeker. Cooper began to walk slowly toward the church, concentrating on simply moving one foot in front of the other.

He saw Yakov running toward him, but then the Russian suddenly stopped and was shouting at Cooper to stop moving, a request Cooper found odd. Why in the hell would he want me to stop moving?

If he did that, he might just find himself on the ground again without the strength to get back up.

“Don’t move cowboy! Stay very still! You have one pissed off big bear looking at you!”

Cooper slowly turned around and looked up to see the polar bear staring back at him, no more than ten feet away. The blood of the seeker covered its snout and paws. The mother bear inhaled deeply the air around her, taking in the rancher’s scent. For nearly a minute the bear and Cooper Wyse stared back at one another, their breath forming small clouds of moisture between them.

Finally the mother bear shook her head from side to side several times and then turned and walked back toward her dead cub. Cooper felt his legs grow weak beneath him, but before he fell, was grasped by the strong arms of the Russian, who allowed the rancher to lean heavily against him for support as they made their way back toward the church.

“Bear whispering cowboy! Would not believe it if Yakov had not seen it with his own eyes!”

Cooper chuckled softly at the Russian’s enthusiastic description.

“That’s me Yakov. Just your typical, everyday bear whisperer.”

Just before reaching the steps of the church, Cooper Wyse passed out. The Russian, feeling the rancher’s body go limp as he lifted Cooper over his shoulder, grunted a single word reaction.

“Pussy.”

LV.

Three Days Later...

Mac Walker lay in a makeshift bed looking out a small window inside Father Riel's church. He had been put there late yesterday after falling from a chair and finding himself unable to get back up. His body was shutting down.

The pain in his lower back came and went with increasing regularity, and his lungs no longer breathed so much as wheezed diminishing amounts of air through his mouth. Mac was grateful to have still been on his feet when the group had gathered around the priest's short wave radio to listen to the initial reports of drones falling from the skies all across the former United States.

Within an hour of those first reports, Mac was contacted directly by Royce Calhoun, leader of the Texas Resistance. The emotion in Calhoun's voice was evident as he described how hundreds of thousands of Texans had come out of hiding once the threat of the drones had been removed. A human wave swept across the American states, pushing out the quickly fracturing remnants of the New United Nations. Wherever a globalist flag once stood, it was replaced by the flag of America.

Calhoun also shared how even the massive structure of the New United Nations building in New York was overrun by people once again demanding

their freedom. A group climbed the thousands of steps to the very top of the structure where it had long been rumored the private residence of the Great Consulate could be found. Inside that residence, so the story went, they found a small room which contained the dead body of a horribly disfigured creature. It appeared the beast had been strapped to the floor of the room with a series of wire straps. The thing had eventually cut through its own arms and legs to gain its freedom, though then likely bled out soon after. Clenched between the beast's teeth was a pair of metallic glasses that appeared to be some kind of transmitting device. Initially, no sign of the Great Consulate was found.

Weeks later, the recorded contents of that transmitter were unlocked, and the final moments of the former Great Consulate's life were discovered. He had sat directly across from the creature, poking at it repeatedly before the monster finally lunged at him, its limbs ripping through the wire constraints as its incredibly large mouth clamped down over the Great Consulate's throat. The most horrific part of the footage though, was the viewpoint the glasses provided of the attack. The Great Consulate was able to watch himself, through the eyes of the creature, be eaten alive. Even more disturbing was that the audio of the footage left no doubt that the Great

Consulate found the experience to be intensely pleasurable.

“Mac, you did it - all of you. That virus ripped right through the entire system. Their vehicles were dead, their defense systems no longer functioning. The entire power grid crashed. There’s been some rioting in places, and I’m sure some New United Nations personnel have been dragged from their offices and, well, there’s gonna be some ugliness. A whole lot of people have a whole lot of pent up frustration. Overall though, it’s been the start of a relatively smooth transition. When people looked up and didn’t see a drone coming at them, they re-discovered their courage.

They started to remember what they had given up. We really are taking this country back. God bless you Mac. God bless all of you.”

The former defender of Dominatus sat silently for some time after receiving Calhoun’s message, unable to put into words the joy and pride he felt in knowing he and his friends helped to free so many from the tyranny and evil they had been living under for so long.

Even as he lay in bed, feeling the life steadily moving out from his body, it was that joy that sustained Mac during the pain and discomfort of his impending death. It gave him both comfort and

relief, knowing his was a life lived, rather than a life wasted.

Father Riel sat next to Mac and asked if he would be willing to receive last rights. Mac rolled his eyes at the priest, chuckling at the request. His voice replied in a croaking whisper.

“You are one tenacious priest aren’t you?”

Father Riel smiled down at Mac, taking the dying man’s hands into his own.

“The choice is your Mac, but I do believe it may provide some comfort to those you care about, those who will

remain after you are gone, that your soul was at peace, that you were right when your moment came.”

Mac smiled at the priest's words, realizing how similar they sounded to those spoken to him by the Old Man during a recent dream.

“I'm not a Catholic, Father.”

‘That is fine Mac. The church has long allowed a certain degree of discretion with such things. If it is the wish of the dying to be given ministration, we are duty bound to do so.’”

Mac closed his eyes again as the pain in

his back and hips once again took hold. Normally the pain subsided after a few seconds, but this time it persisted much longer, causing Mac to cry out softly. Father Riel's hands remained clasped around Mac's.

“It's ok Mac, I'm here with you.”

Finally the pain began to fade, allowing Mac to open his eyes again.

“You think it'll make this easier for the others? For Dublin? She buried her grandfather just two years ago and now she has to watch me like this. I...I feel guilty about that.”

“I do believe it will help her to more easily accept your passing Mac. Her and the others, yes.”

Mac closed his eyes again, considering the priest's request to administer to him the last rights.

“Ok Father. Go ahead. If you think it will help the others...go ahead.”

Later that afternoon, as the sunlight began to fade toward impending darkness, after drifting in and out of sleep for several hours, Mac Walker awoke to find Dublin's hand holding his own. He was reminded again that the girl he had protected for so many years

had grown into a beautiful, strong, and intelligent woman.

“I love you Mac.”

Mac attempted to respond with words, but found the effort to speak too great. He could simply look back at Dublin and nod.

Father Riel sat next to Dublin, his low voice soothing and relaxed.

“You are surrounded in love Mac. Reese and Bear are here, as well as Cooper, Yakov, and Khalid. We are all here with you in this, just as God has always been with you Mac. Always and

forever.”

Mac nodded his head as tears slowly traced faint lines of moisture down his cheeks. He heard Dublin begin to cry quietly next to him, and fought to try and comfort her, but again, found himself too weak to do anything more than close his eyes and focus on taking another breath as the priest's words continued.

“Mac, your suffering is but temporary. In suffering, you are now joined in God's everlasting peace and Christ's great mercy. You are absolved of all sin and welcomed into the kingdom of heaven. I commend you Mac, to almighty God. We deliver your faithful

servant, Mackenzie Walker, to you now Lord. Receive him. Remove his suffering from him. May he find the one Truth, and know everlasting life. Amen.”

Dublin placed her head against Mac’s chest and gently hugged him as her body shook with sobs. Mac managed to raise his arms just enough to place them around Dublin so that he could hug her back as he again attempted to speak. Finally his lungs produced enough air to allow him to form the words.

“Dublin...it’s ok. It’s ok. Don’t...be sad. Please. I love you. I love you so much.”

Mac Walker's body continued, as it had done its entire life, to fight. Dublin and Reese both sat next to him, and even though Mac's eyes remained closed and he gave no indication of understanding their words, they spoke to Mac long into the night. Dublin told Mac of how much her grandfather admired him, and how she had, when younger, thought of Mac as some kind of indestructible super hero. Reese cried as he recalled the time Mac first introduced him to Dublin inside of Freedom Tavern, and how the former Navy SEAL had warned Reese to treat Dublin right – or else.

Shortly after midnight, Dublin looked out

the window nearest Mac's bed and was stunned at a night sky lit up with the most beautiful array of colors she had ever seen. During her time in Dominatus, she had watched the Northern Lights many times, but the display on this night in Churchill, Manitoba was beyond anything she had witnessed before.

“Reese – look at that!”

Reese rose from his chair and looked out the window, his eyes growing wide in amazement as he witnessed the massive display of illuminated green, red, and purple light stretching across the sky.

Mac's breathing suddenly worsened

considerably as his chest heaved upward and then remained there for several seconds, before falling again. After nearly a minute of no movement, Mac's chest rose again, and then fell.

As Dublin and Reese silently watched his final moments of life, Mac's eyes suddenly opened, appearing to stare out at the swirling lights that continued to slash across the otherwise dark canvas of the Manitoba night sky. A small smile formed on Mac Walker's face as he continued to look out through the window, until his chest raised and then lowered one more time while whispering a final word.

“God.”

**Other titles available from
D.W. Ulsterman:**

-DOMINATUS

**-MAC WALKER'S BENGHAZI:
BOOK ONE**

**-MAC WALKER'S BENGHAZI:
BOOK TWO**

**-MAC WALKER'S BENGHAZI:
BOOK THREE**

-MAC WALKER'S BENGHAZI: The
Complete Collection

-MAC WALKER'S BETRAYAL:
BOOK ONE

-MAC WALKER'S BETRAYAL:
BOOK TWO

-MAC WALKER'S BETRAYAL:
BOOK THREE

COMING NOVEMBER 2013:

**“THE SECOND OLDEST
PROFESSION”
Book One**

**You can visit D.W. Ulsterman for
news and updates at his blog:
theulstermanreport.com**

**Or contact him personally via
Facebook or Twitter!**

