

The Project for a New American Democracy

A novel

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[E]conomic leadership . . . does not readily expand, like the medieval lord's military leadership, into the leadership of nations.

– Joseph Schumpeter

Behold! God sent me with a sword, just before the Hour, and placed my daily sustenance beneath the shadow of my spear.

– Islamic apocrypha

Dismissal [of apocalyptic thinking] leaves us deaf to the internal logic of people who believe they must shatter the world to make it whole. If God does stick his finger in history, He has a sense of humor in His choice of saints.

– Gershom Gorenberg

New Mexico

“We’ve seen better days.”

Barrett Parker sighed as he drove his pickup west. He brooded too. The idea of national unity, in war or peace, was unknown to most Americans. They only knew a polarized, paralyzed country, run at least as much by money and think tanks as by citizens. Everyone knew about the money, not so many about the think tanks.

“No doubt about it. The center isn’t holding, America’s slouching toward something bad, and no one reads Yeats anymore.”

He muttered noisily in the 96 degree heat, past Herefords grazing on dry grass and stacks of alfalfa trucked in from Texas, and past miles of barbed wire and ranch entrances with iron grates to keep the livestock from wandering out.

“Most have never even heard of Yeats.”

The land became hilly and the cattle disappeared in the rear-view mirror. He was heading into the foothills of the pass leading to Albuquerque. As the radio signal faded in Tijeras Canyon he switched to a Gram Parsons CD. Satellite radio was not in his ken. It was one of several ways for companies to track his tastes and whereabouts and enter them into a database stored on a server somewhere in the world.

His thoughts soon enough turned to more immediate matters.

“These people better pay me.” He’d been stiffed by more than one news outfit in the last year. “I don’t drive thirty miles into town and sit in a TV studio for the hell of it. Ahh. . . . No sense getting worked up before I go on. Khadija’ll notice right away and chide me, again.”

An hour drive into Albuquerque and crisp interviews on the war in Syria and Iraq had yielded nothing but promises of checks in the proverbial mail or unanswered emails

requesting payment. Press TV and France 24 dealt through a middleman in Philadelphia who Barrett thought absconded with his money. Al Jazeera had been prompt, though, and he liked Khadija, his producer back in the capital of Qatar, Doha, where Al Jazeera is based.

Past the canyon were the houses and strip malls of Albuquerque. A wince came and went, more briefly than ever, as he passed the Carlisle Boulevard exit near where he used to live with a girlfriend. He hadn't seen or heard from since he left that day. A few lines of a song came to mind and he offered up a reasonable rendition.

*An' the only thing I know for sure
Is you don't want me anymore
An' I'm holding on to nothing but the wheel.*

He found a place in the studio lot, looked about warily, then entered the building that handled satellite uplinks for news organizations, and connected a slow-paced town on the Rio Grande with the world's power centers.

"Barrett Parker. I have a two pm uplink to Al Jazeera English."

"Studio 4, just down the hall to the left." The receptionist replied courteously, despite the somber look she saw on his face.

Barrett nodded and headed down the corridor, stopping in the men's room to check his hair and tie. He never tried to make either look too neat and he even cultivated a raffish appearance. He wanted to avoid looking like just another haircut in a suit who gave pat answers accentuated by a tired quote from de Tocqueville or Santayana. Barrett, following a nineteenth-century thinker, thought the only thing we learned from history was that we *don't* learn from history.

"Hegel got it right."

He closed the door of the ten-by-ten studio and sat in a high-back leather chair. A 48" LCD screen behind him showed a jpeg of the Sandia Mountains he'd just driven through. He clipped on the earpiece and mike, and checked his appearance once more in the monitor.

"Good to see you again, Barrett. Have I ever mentioned that you are the handsomest analyst in the US?"

It was the alluring, Oxbridge-accented voice of Khadija al-Thounia, who'd read his articles and brought him on the network early in the Syrian civil war. She knew a few kind words eased the gruff demeanor that higher-ups thought off-putting. They weren't trying to be like cheery American news stations. They just didn't want

someone with a scowl to be broadcast around the world to tens of millions of people. They already had to show a slew of dictators, generals, and self-proclaimed emirs.

“Pretty sure Tony Cordesman wins the highly-coveted handsomest analyst award every year, and is rewarded with a free subscription to *Analyst’s Quarterly*. I appreciate the compliment though. Since you brought up the matter of looks, how come I never get to see you on the monitor here? It’s unfair.”

“Life is unfair. One of your presidents said as much.”

“Full burka, huh.”

“*Barrett!* You know full well we don’t wear burkas here! But *I* know full well you have a sense of humor that can be . . . what’s the word I’m searching for?”

“Off-putting?”

“Just so.”

“Yet endearing?”

“Not so! I believe you once described your humor to me as ‘deadly pan’.”

“Something like that. Yeah, I allow people to sense when I’m joking, and don’t feel the need for handwaving and grinning.”

“That can have disadvantages.”

“So I’m told.”

“Anyway, I see you’re wearing a brown herringbone jacket again. And what about your –”

Barrett lifted a foot until the jean leg and a tan cowboy boot came into view in the monitors in Albuquerque and Doha. Soft laughter could be heard in the background of the Persian Gulf studio.

“New cowboy boots?”

“Yep. They’re Luccheses. Expertly distressed, I’d say.” Barrett returned to his position before the camera and rechecked his tie and hair. “Aren’t you all wearing cowboy boots in Qatar yet? That was how our think tanks drew it up back in 2003. Bring change to the Middle East, they said. Start with the footwear, even if they’re just Tony Lamas or Noconas. The free market and democratic processes will follow soon enough. That’s how it worked out in Texas.”

“Well, it hasn’t worked out here yet. Not even in Iraq or Afghanistan. I’ll have to take your word for it regarding Texas.”

“So that’s why I’m on today? To discuss the cowboy-boot gap in your part of the world?”

“You got it, *pardner*. But just in case the anchor strays off topic, please be ready for a question or two about the Middle East – oh, and your country’s presidential election. There are some people in this troubled world of ours who are interested in such matters, banal though they seem at times.”

“Not many in this country.”

“That one was at least *somewhat* endearing. We go live in thirty seconds. Count to ten for me so we can get the compression?”

“Ein . . . zwei . . . drei . . . vier . . . How’s my Arabic coming along?”

“Sehr gut!”

Barrett listened carefully and tried not to look too intense as the anchor gave an intro. He couldn’t see the anchor but he was sure his appearance was neat and tidy, and his teeth white as porcelain.

Anchor: The war against the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, or ISIL, has stalled and meanwhile in Afghanistan, the Taliban have seized two more districts in Helmand province. We’re going to speak now with military analyst Barrett Parker about the wars and what they portend for the upcoming presidential election. Barrett how do you see things going in Syria?

Barrett: Not well. There is no effective ground force to fight ISIL in Syria. Too much friction between the many rebel groups. Over in Iraq, it took way too long before Iraqi and Kurdish forces got it together for the push on Mosul.

Anchor: So the coalition’s air campaign is having little effect.

Barrett: Air power without effective ground operations doesn’t provide enough. That’s a universally accepted military truth.

Anchor: Are things any more promising in Afghanistan?

Barrett: Somewhat. The Afghan army has been able to retake most of the major portions it lost to the Taliban in the last year – with the help of American airpower. Effective ground troops force the Taliban to concentrate troops and that leaves them vulnerable to airpower. It’s every American pilot’s dream.

Anchor: The American general directing operations in Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan has become increasingly critical of the president's refusal to send ground troops into Syria and back into Afghanistan.

Barrett: Perhaps General Hillock's being *too* critical. He's been testing the boundaries of civil-military relations in recent weeks. Polling data show a split in the American people about using ground troops, with those in favor slowly on the rise.

Anchor: All this is playing out amid a close presidential campaign and of course continued gridlock in Washington. Valerie Roberts, the president's former secretary of state, has all but nailed down her party's nomination and holds a slight edge over likely opponents in the November election. None of them are able to pull ahead of the pack, and the convention is in two weeks.

Barrett: Ms Roberts indeed has the edge. However, the other side is scrambling mightily to strengthen their field of candidates. Things are getting nastier and nastier, and the campaign promises to be an especially hostile one. Nonetheless, viewership of campaign news is down and donations are almost exclusively from high rollers. The public isn't especially interested these days.

(Barrett briefly thought about mentioning Yeats and Hegel.)

Anchor: The national debt is often talked about by both camps. How high is it now?

Barrett: About twenty trillion dollars.

(The anchor paused a moment, probably for effect.)

Anchor: Is talk of some states leaving the union serious? Surely that hasn't been meaningfully discussed since your Civil War in the 1860s.

Barrett: Four state legislatures have introduced bills to secede from the United States – at least in the event of an unfavorable outcome this November. More states are expected to follow suit. There isn't much in the way of enduring myths holding this country together anymore and I know of no force to hold it together.

Anchor: Is there any candidate that can come to the fore and deal with these problems?

Barrett: *Whew*. I'm afraid not. The country is deeply polarized over the wars and the debt and the concentration of wealth. There's no shining figure on horseback in sight. We're slouching toward something bad.

(Both men paused for an uncomfortable moment or two.)

Anchor: Thank you, Barrett Parker, for your thoughts. As always.

Barrett: Thanks for having me.

Barrett leaned back in the chair, the exhilaration of a sharp interview offset by the sobriety of the content. His country was coming apart, and the wars and the economy were major causes of it.

Back in Doha, Khadija noticed his pensiveness.

"Thanks for keeping in bounds, Barrett." He'd rolled his eyes at doltish questions before and some presenters wouldn't have him on anymore. Khadija defended him, though. "You know, pardner, you're quite the paradox: a gruff desert-dweller with a PhD from a prestigious university. Princeton?"

"The faculty and alumni of Princeton would insist that I immediately correct you. I took my PhD at the University of Chicago. Post-doc, Harvard."

"Bastions of interventionist foreign policy, both of them. Yet you criticize interventionism in your columns – rather harshly too. So why don't *you* run for president?" The idea of so frank a politician in the White House was instantly deemed ridiculous. "Okay, I'm kidding, I guess. But you know world politics and you were a civilian consultant during the Iraq counterinsurgency effort. I'll bet you've more military medals than the last three presidents combined."

"That's not saying much, my bootless Qatari friend. You have as many medals as two of them. The other guy dodged the draft in the national guard, where I presume he at least got a National Defense Medal."

"Your wolf would be a great vice president."

"Yes, he would. Jesse speaks softly and carries very big sticks. He'd be a forceful negotiator and adversaries would feel obliged to seek a middle ground. And unlike some politicians, he doesn't say foolish things. I'll make a deal with you, Khadija."

"What's that." Experience caused her to wince.

“I’ll run for president of the US if you run for emir of Qatar.”

“That’s not how we do things over here. As you now know, we don’t even wear cowboy boots here yet.”

“Then you’ll just have to organize a coup. I know some people in Langley who –”

Khadija stopped him cold as another producer looked at her in alarm. “Ummmm, Barrett Parker, esteemed military analyst and somewhat endearing colleague, even though we recognize that you’re engaging in deadly pan at the moment, I think you should refrain from more such attempts. Better you head for that bar on Route 66 you mention from time to time – and please do so *immediately*.”

“That would be Kelly’s.”

“Just so. And do say hello to Jesse from his several avid admirers here in Doha.”

“I will. Hey, one more thing.”

“Go ahead. Just know that my finger’s on the cutoff button.” She wasn’t kidding.

“A big wolf could be very helpful in a seizure of government. *Any* government. Just sayin’.”

Khadija giggled mischievously and ended the connection. Barrett headed for Kelly’s in the Nob Hill section of the city.

Driving east on Route 66, Barrett was still wondering what Khadija looked like. His imagination ran wild, conjuring up images from a dozen films with various ratings. The fun was intruded upon by the traffic as he left the downtown area on First Street. Back east it would be considered refreshingly light. New Mexicans thought it a sad portent of the encroachment of outsiders into their charming town.

He naturally enough recalled a Middle Eastern woman he’d known while in graduate school in Chicago. A smile came across his face as he recalled her confidence and wit, her shapeliness and stockings – *seamed* stockings. They constituted the very foundations of their relationship. Brief though their time together was, he recalled it as absolutely wonderful.

He turned south on Yale and headed for a liquor store a few blocks down. It was the only place in town that carried a particular French brandy.

Ft McNair

Only promising mid-career officers receive orders for the National War College at Ft McNair, a campus-like installation graced with venerable buildings in the French colonial style, a meticulously maintained golf course, and a peerless view of the Potomac a mile downstream from the White House and Pentagon.

They are not there for R&R or regular duty. They are there to better ascend the ranks, ahead of most of their colleagues. The officers there are on the fast track. Many will become generals in a decade or so and command the most powerful army in the world. At the War College, they take courses, give presentations, and write papers before receiving the equivalent of a master's degree. Afterwards, they are sent to their next post somewhere in the world.

Lt Col Wade Thackeray successfully defended his master's thesis an hour earlier and would shortly attend a gathering in his honor at the Officers Club. He wrote a harsh criticism of counterinsurgency doctrines, which had become quite popular in the army since the Iraqi fighting trailed off in 2006. Thackeray argued, uncompromisingly and controversially, that General Petraeus's vaunted counterinsurgency programs had nothing to do with the change. The Sunnis simply faced a hopeless strategic situation of fighting US troops, Shia militias, and al Qaeda. They could never win that conflict, so they made the only deal they could. It was expediency, not counterinsurgency. It all came undone and Iraq was in chaos again.

The debate wasn't an academic ping-pong volley; soldiers have no time for that. The difference would determine how and where and if American troops were used around the world. The counterinsurgency creed had been enthusiastically embraced by the military, the public, and the media. The creed made wars around the world look doable to politicians and generals alike.

That made Thackeray and many of his peers shudder. They'd spent most of the last fifteen years in the Middle East, and disagreed with their superiors. As the months passed and the casualties mounted, they were doing so less respectfully and more

openly. Thackeray took the point. He worked with colleagues, including a respected West Point instructor, and indirectly with a maverick civilian in the Southwest. The West Point instructor and Thackeray were working on a book examining the history of counterinsurgency which they felt would undermine the creed and force the army to rethink its usefulness around the world.

Thackeray walked between rows of French colonial buildings, with arc-shaped clay tiles arrayed across steep proud roofs, and then around a golf course where a passel of colonels and generals were finishing the back nine. He looked out onto the Potomac. Ft McNair is two miles south of the 14th Street Bridge and the river flattens out considerably, its breadth twice what it is up at Georgetown and Key Bridge. Late summer and hot, bugs flitted about noisomely. He stared out into the shimmering water, its smooth surface occasionally riven by a speed boat or yacht returning to marinas in Alexandria.

The arguments of his thesis intermingled with memories of Iraq and Afghanistan. He'd been back from overseas for a year and a half, but certain moments kept returning. People replay the moments of a car accident for quite some time after the event – days and weeks. War is like a hideous car wreck, with immense and grotesque casualties. Thackeray kept seeing an IED detonate into a reddish-orange fireball and upturn a Humvee just ahead of him while on patrol in eastern Afghanistan. Five troops were in it. Two killed, the others badly burned. They were his men.

He looked at the government buildings upriver and began to seethe.

The IED had been used extensively and with deadly effect by former Iraqi soldiers in the Sunni resistance. They taught it to al Qaeda jihadis who then went to Afghanistan and taught the Taliban. It later spread into Syria. “The diffusion of jihadi technology,” he found himself murmuring. “And my country’s role in it.”

A classmate noticed him and came over.

“Great paper, Wade. Gutsy and timely too. Petraeus and the faithful won’t like it, but your arguments are borne out by events and you know that us field grades are behind you wherever you go. Have they cut your orders yet?”

“Got them this morning. Ft Bragg, Nawth Cackalacky. They gave me a battalion in 82nd Airborne.”

“Hot damn, Wade! That’s a plumb assignment if ever there was one. You’ll be commanding general of 82nd or Big Red One some day – ten years tops. Didn’t your father have Big Red One?”

“Yep. I spent several years at Ft Riley and got to go to Germany with a Reforger or two. Then he got XVIII Airborne Corps.”

“And a third star. So Bragg’s a second home. The army sure is a family business these days. Everyone here had a father and grandfather who was full-bull or higher. My grandfather commanded the 196th Light Infantry in I Corps. My father did twenty-five and then went to work for RAND.”

“Yeah. I remember your saying that once or twice.”

“Maybe more. You know anybody down there in Double-A Land?”

“Yes, I do. It’s a small world for guys like us. Niven Grierson is there. He has one of the sister battalions. Good man. He tells me that Rod Valsen has another one. I think I knew him as a company commander in Anbar a while back – ’06 or maybe ’07.”

“I knew Valsen in A-stan in 2012. A good man, a resolute man. From Minnesota, as I recall. His grandfathers were miners in the Mesabi Range. Tough life, tough men. You can trust him, Wade – *always*. Ever heard of how the Grierson name came about?”

“Indeed I have. It’s a legend. His family took the name of the Union cavalry raider who tore through Louisiana and freed a few hundred slaves along the way.”

“That’s it. And a long line of soldiers was born. Switching to more domestic matters for a moment, Wade, have you found a place in Fayetteville for the family yet? I can give you the number of a realtor if –”

“No thanks. I’ll be in a BOQ, at least for a while. My family is headed back to Oklahoma. I got the papers two weeks ago.”

“Oh . . . yeah. I see. That’s real rough, Wade. Sorry to hear it. Real sorry. There’s been a lot of that going around the army over the last ten years. Divorce law offices are popping up in the strip malls just outside every base now, and doing land office business.”

“Good to hear someone’s getting rich. It sure isn’t us.”

“No, it sure isn’t.”

Thackeray thought back to the glistening crystal and jewelry at a Capitol Hill gathering a few nights earlier. A *soirée* someone called it. The watches and necklaces each cost more than a captain made in a year. Some maybe more than a full-bull did. These were the legendary Washington insiders, the glitterati, the men and women who

stood at the head of machinery that was accruing great power and wealth, acting boldly in the world despite profound ignorance of it, and content to take cues from donors and think tanks.

It was an evening of networking, exchanging cards, and advancing careers. It was soon clear to everyone that he, a light colonel, was of no use. They made brief, polite conversation, thanked him for his service, and moved on. He thought them vain and trivial.

He was starting to despise these people. So were many of his fellow soldiers.

“Anyway, no more pissing and moaning ‘bout me and mine. Where’re you off to?”

“Wade, they got me headed for Centcom in Qatar. Then off to Kurdistan. We got big plans for Kurdistan. *Real* big plans.”

“More big plans. More *real* big plans. They just keep planning big, don’t they.”

“That’s what the folks up there do for a living.” He pointed upriver to the west side of the White House. Across the river, the outer ring of the Pentagon could be seen behind the sparse palisade along the GW Parkway. “I’ll bet they got big plans for you and 82nd Airborne. That’s why they gave you and Grierson and Valsen battalion commands. You, Lt Col Wade Thackeray, are what the people outside our high and unbreachable walls call *the man!* I don’t know where this country would be without guys like you.”

“Not sure. I truly don’t. I look around and think guys like us are all this country has these days. We’ll see if that’s enough. . . . Anyway, I’ll catch you at the O Club in a while. First round’s on me, of course.”

“That’s a big affirmative!” The officer headed toward the colonial buildings then turned back to the pensive colonel. “Wade . . . you really are the man. I know there are big things waiting for you down there at Bragg!”

Thackeray laughed a bit. “Yeah. Then maybe I’ll see you in Kurdistan next year.”

“Or Iran!”

“Careful what you wish for. They just might deploy you there – and me too.”

“By *parachute*, Wade! By *parachute!*”

The officer gave Wade Thackeray a crisp salute, even though they held the same rank. A group of fellow field-grades witnessed the exchange and themselves saluted him. Wade stood and returned the courtesy and they began to applaud. He was surprised that he choked up. Soldiers are not known for that and they try not to be known for that. He steeled himself by thinking of the bitterly cold mountains he'd patrolled in Afghanistan, and the emotion quickly passed.

Thackeray looked out a little longer on the smooth waters of the Potomac and the occasional glistening red of the setting sun on the slowly rippling surface. The emotion returned, but the other guys were gone. He looked upriver and anger spread inside him. The deference to those above him, upon which his career and expectations were built, faded more than he thought possible.

The call of war, I

Three Saudi youths amble purposelessly down a brightly-lit commercial district in Riyadh. They are from a working class part of the city – not poor but far from the affluent strata of the Kingdom that outsiders think typical. They are in engineering school, hoping to find good jobs in the oil or petrochemical industry. Their prospects are not good as their tribal elders aren't well positioned. And that's how people get ahead in Saudi Arabia. They see their futures as even less promising by the slump in oil prices that began in 2014, when the Americans flooded the market with fracked oil and gas.

The girls they see that night peer from their *niqabs* to inspect the boys. They see inexpensive attire and no car. They assess the degree of assurance on their faces. Poor boys. No futures. The girls move on. Other girls come by, some daring to put the *niqabs* into their Coach purses as they breeze from shop to shop. They too pass the boys by, and watch for the virtue police as they near intersections.

A year ago, all three boys had been avid members of an underground reform movement. They visited likeminded Facebook pages and hoped one day to use their technical degrees to bring Saudi Arabia into the modern world, once the last of the old warrior-king's sons died and power came to his grandsons – and maybe his granddaughters too.

The meetings were thoroughly infiltrated by security forces. One evening, as they left a Riyadh house, the security forces were there to meet them in bluish-grey camouflage uniforms, swinging truncheons and glaring determinedly. No beatings ensued, only shoves and warnings. Later, their tribal elders berated and slapped them for bringing shame upon them.

The boys stopped going to reform meetings, though it had little to do with their elders' rebukes. Their country was crushing reform movements, not only at home but also in Egypt and Bahrain. Surely the monarchy would never allow democracy to gain a purchase in the Kingdom.

The boys wonder if democracy was even desirable. They see where it had tried to assert itself in the region – Syria and Yemen – and saw it failing badly. They looked to where it had been able to begin in the region – Libya and Iraq – and shuddered. This too they feel was the work of Americans, who were determined to humiliate the Middle East, again.

The mullahs at the Salafi meetings they were now attending were right. Democracy is a *foreign* belief, artificially transplanted or forcibly imposed by the West. It was as alien and meddlesome as the borders of the Middle East which were drawn up by scheming British and French diplomats. It becomes clear to them that the key to salvation lies not in decadent and doomed western conceits; it lies within the treasures of the Islamic world – in the Holy Quran.

Older men, revered men, veterans of the mujahideen fight against the Russians in Afghanistan, speak to the boys. One slowly opens a white cotton cloth and reveals a Kalashnikov. The youths gaze upon it as they would a relic. The thick smell of gun oil eddies up and fills their nostrils for the first time and is as intoxicating as any spice or perfume. Another man hands out copies of a fallen jihadi's diary. On the cover is photograph of the man's corpse. A smile is on his face and the boys are told he died a fulfilled man. The boys have seen scores of such photographs on jihadi websites.

They do not know that the smiles are worked onto the men's faces by ISIL propagandists, then photographed.

Older men tell of their perseverance despite the superior numbers and fearsome weapons of foreign enemies, of their determination to purify themselves by demonstrating their faith, and of their victory over enemies in Afghanistan and within their very souls. Perhaps most persuasively and appealingly, they speak of the fraternal bonds forged in the fires of war – bonds that have remained strong to this day and that have brought them jobs and wives.

Younger veterans of the war against the Americans in Iraq speak the same. Girls in their neighborhood tell the boys how much they admire men who show their valor and faith in war.

Mullahs and veterans alike talk of something viscerally appealing to the boys – something that in other wordings and in other wars has a similar appeal to boys in most parts of the world. They speak of honor and glory, valor and hardship, leading ultimately to overcoming the enemy. They speak of *victory*. How magical that word is to all in the room. The thought resonated in their minds, intermingling with and strengthening myths and stories they'd often heard of ancient Arab hosts in the times of Saladin, though not of modern armies.

The boys had seen Arab armies bend then run away in the face of the US and Israel. Things were different now. There was a new Arab army on the field that did not bend or run. This new army was defeating corrupt secular leaders and western armies alike. It was uniting the Islamic world and on the verge of bringing about the final battle that would bring the caliphate and divine favor.

The most esteemed mullah, a man who had fought the Americans in Iraq, a man of such holiness and wisdom that the security police feared him and wanted desperately to arrest him, spoke of unmistakable signs of the final battle's approach. There were lyrical passages from the Quran and hadiths. One causes them to freeze then shudder in wonder:

Behold! God sent me with a sword, just before the Hour, and placed my daily sustenance beneath the shadow of my spear.

The mullah speaks of portentous events in the Levant and of his nightly dreams that awoke him in trepidation and wonder. There was the coming of the man who would lead the forces of darkness. "An American . . . an American – a *Dajjal* – shall come with his hosts. We will fight them and we will defeat them." His words, especially the one for the anti-Christ-like figure in Islamic apocrypha, hold both foreboding and hope for the boys and men in the room.

The mullah closes his eyes and pauses for several moments. The room falls silent. What great words is he about to impart? What sign will he reveal? The holy man stands slowly, his eyes closed fervently, and slowly pulls aside his robe from his chest, revealing a jagged shrapnel wound he'd suffered in Iraq. Gasps of awe and admiration ensue, followed by laments of faithlessness and oaths of resolution.

The mullah speaks.

"Behold! God sent me with a sword, just before the Hour, and placed my daily sustenance beneath the shadow of my spear."

The words resonate in the boys' very being and they repeat them in soft murmurs.

"Behold! God sent me with a sword, just before the Hour, and placed my daily sustenance beneath the shadow of my spear."

They are convinced that they live in propitious times and that they must be parts of the unfolding of the plan ordained from the heavens and dictated by the most esteemed mullah there before them. They were determined to leave their technical college and head north. There were men at the meeting who would help them cross the frontier,

and from there to Raqqa or Mosul, where they would become fighters in the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant. They would serve their faith, win the final battle, and return to Riyadh victorious, admired, and coveted.

Similar meetings take place elsewhere in the Kingdom. Mullahs and veterans tell the same compelling stories of faith and valor and redemption. The boys there also listen attentively and even raptly. They are especially attracted by the words of a coming danger from the United States, from which so much evil had come over the years. They were undoubtedly fortunate to be living in such wondrous days. They determine to find glory of their own in the war in the Levant.

Some of the meetings take place near military bases and many of the gatherers are soldiers in the Saudi army. Many are enlisted personnel, though there are several officers too. One of the bases is Taif, not far from Mecca.

The meetings are held outside the Kingdom as well – in Algeria and Libya, Egypt and Jordan, the Emirates and Kuwait. They also gather in scores of cities in France, Belgium, Britain, Germany, and across western Europe. Word spreads into the United States, in large cities such as Los Angeles and smaller ones such as Chattanooga.

The failings and sins of the youths will be put behind them in a gloriously violent cataclysm. They will all be part of the ordained Islamic army and the final battle against the hosts of darkness that were gathering in America. And events there are watched as diligently as the ones on the battlefields of Syria and Iraq.

Washington, DC

The Project for a New American Democracy takes up three upper-level floors of an office building on New Hampshire Ave, NW, not far from older, more renowned institutions such as Brookings and the Institute for Policy Studies. The Project's stated goal is to reinvigorate American democracy and recreate its view of the ideal form of citizenship that flourished in the Ancient world and in the early years of America. The board comprises a number of business leaders, clergymen, and retired military officers.

Borden Woolfolk, the Project's 45-year-old director, parked his dark blue Mercedes in the adjacent lot, wiped a smudge from the left front fender with a hanky, and walked the block and a half to the institute he'd led since its founding two years ago. His friends called him "Bordy". Everyone at the Project except board members called him "Mr Woolfolk".

Woolfolk walked briskly through the reception area on the fifth floor which was graced with prints of Ancient Greece and Rome, niches holding urns and figurines, and a nine-foot replica of Winged Victory. With practiced casualness, he lifted his ID from the breast pocket of his black Brioni suit with surgeon cuffs, accented by a crimson Hermes tie, and let the security guard at the front desk get a brief though unnecessary glimpse. Woolfolk appreciated the deferent nod and smile from the guard. Former quarterbacks have a swagger, even if they played at a Division III school like Haverford.

After taking the elevator to the twelfth floor, he responded to his personal assistant in the same assured manner and momentarily regarded a photograph of himself in his naval uniform. Dress whites, a lieutenant, junior grade, with a single row of ribbons. That bothered him, but he had been in the reserves – a common enough thing in the nineties after the quick win of Gulf War One. It looked good on the resumé and who knows, you might meet someone who'd be of help someday. A little networking never hurt in this town. Furthermore, he was in intelligence and that had a cachet at the investment banking firm specializing in leveraged buyouts and liquidations that he'd worked for, risen rapidly in, and left to get into politics.

Washington had always beckoned. His father, a real estate baron on the South Jersey coast, had been involved in a few campaigns for local government and the House of Representatives. Now Borden Woolfolk was in the game, albeit behind the scenes for the moment.

The Project comprised several sections. He kept an eye on all of them but with the election under way, the New American Leadership section was the most important. Yes, there were the Democracy in the Middle East, the New Fiscal Era, and the Moral Renewal sections, and while there was some connection with presidential politics, the campaign got most of Woolfolk's attention.

Woolfolk had thrown the Project's resources behind two figures in the campaign – a woman governor from Wyoming and the founder of a regional airline in the South. Neither was doing well in the polls. Low double digits. They were what the investment world called “dogs” – they were just lying there. There were occasional spikes after a witty barb in a debate but nothing lasting, nothing promising. The candidates were all Teflon but they were also Tupperware. Practical, useful, but dull. The Project's supporters were getting uneasy and phoning him. Woolfolk had to field a half dozen worried calls everyday.

The convention was two weeks away and no one had enough delegates to win on the first ballot, or the fifth or sixth in all likelihood. Conventions are supposed to be coronations – extravaganzas that sing the praises of the party and boost the nominee in polls. That wasn't going to happen. The bickering would go on for several days and for many ballots, and whoever came out on top would look like Jake LaMotta after one of the *Raging Bull* bouts with Sugar Ray Robinson. Bad image, bad candidate, bad results in November.

Various power brokers had tried to get the candidates to drop out and rally behind a single candidate for the good of the party, but only one agreed. He had just a few dozen delegates anyway.

Think tanks don't make money from publications or their analysts' appearance on cable news stations. Think tanks depend on donors and the Project's high rollers wanted to see it stand with the big shots, which they thought had lapsed into policy-wonkery and arid scholasticism, and which had failed to comprehend the crisis in America. They were unfit to devise a bold course of action to restore the nation's honor and greatness, as the Project envisioned them. The backers wanted Woolfolk to come up with a viable, bankable candidate. They wanted decisive action.

The Project's interests aside, Woolfolk wanted to back a winner so he'd attain high office – secretary of state or national security adviser. He preferred the former's power

but was smitten by the aura in the latter's name. He typed out both on his computer, altering the font until he found a one that befit him – Chancery.

Ten in the morning was set for a meeting with Anthony Sabatini, a former ranger captain and CIA case officer who was organizing a seminar on Kurdistan. He was exceptionally sharp on the capabilities of regional armies, owing chiefly to his skepticism of official training reports. What officer was going to say that after a year of hard work and millions of taxpayer bucks, the troops were just as lethargic and the officers just as corrupt as the day he arrived? None. If one did, a colonel would redact the report, reassign the officer, and write a career-crushing OER on him.

Anthony was respected by fellow officers with whom he kept in touch, and they spoke more candidly with him than with superiors. There were rumors that Anthony had freelanced while on a mission to the Iranian nuclear facility of Parchin just southeast of Tehran, where the Revolutionary Guard Corps was designing nuclear warheads. He'd left CIA the previous year under murky circumstances. In the covert world, that could mean that he'd had his cover blown by a Russian or Iranian counterpart, or that he punched out his section chief, or that he'd been proven right when his section chief had blundered.

Woolfolk claimed to admire mavericks. He thought himself one. What bond trader didn't? Woolfolk wasn't a maverick. He was an office seeker. He despised mavericks, at least ones in his employ. They might upstage him in front of big donors. They might be proven right where he had blundered. Sabatini was a maverick but he had the ranger and CIA mystique about him.

Woolfolk couldn't very well make inquiries as to what Anthony Sabatini had done in Iran or why he and the Company parted ways, but Sabatini had expertise with the Kurds and they had a special place in the Project's plan for reshaping the Middle East. Besides, the Parchin facility was leveled by a powerful blast in October of 2014 and many people thought Sabatini was involved. Had he trained a local saboteur? Or planted a device that exploded upon receiving a signal from a laptop somewhere in the world?

A co-worker in the Moral Renewal section of the Project lifted weights with Anthony and told Woolfolk that the former ranger had a bullet wound in his lower back and another in his thigh. He occasionally winced on stretching before the workout or while doing curls. All this added to Sabatini's mystique. Woolfolk imagined Sabatini fleeing from Parchin, Revolutionary Guard soldiers firing their Kalashnikovs at him as he sprinted across desert sands, mere moments before Parchin exploded in a tremendous fireball.

Sabatini had never been inside Parchin and had nothing to do with the blast, but he wasn't at liberty to speak of what he'd done, or not done. He'd been shot twice at the Iran-Turkmenistan border, hundreds of miles from Parchin and two years before the place exploded. Nonetheless, the CIA liked the world to think it had something to do with it, and Woolfolk liked rival institutions to think one of his people had something to do with it. Sabatini's presence conferred a clandestine and dangerous aura. That meant more prestige for the Project.

The athletic forty-year-old former ranger once considered placing a sign on his office door reading "I didn't do it," but thought better of it. He admitted to himself that he liked the mystery around him. It elevated him above the rest in some ways. He disliked the awe many had because they were certain that he had killed people, whether at Parchin or Iraq or Afghanistan. It was juvenile, it was pathetic.

"I found one of those Afghan war rugs you told me about, Anthony." Woolfolk pointed to a 2x3 carpet on a far wall, images of two Kalashnikovs in the center, surrounded by a border of woven images of 7.62 mm cartridges. Pashtun weavers in Pakistani refugee camps made them during the Russian war in the eighties and used the proceeds to buy supplies for the mujahideen. Demand continued long after the war.

"Glad you found one. They're certainly pieces of history."

In the investment banking world, Woolfolk learned that the successful executive acquired the accoutrements of the leisure class: a German luxury car, Italian suits and shirts and shoes, a co-op on the East Side, and one day a place well out on Long Island with a winding, pebbly driveway.

There was also one's collection. The successful executive had to display breadth, or the verisimilitude of it, by having lithographs and water colors, or a bookcase of first editions – some signed to one person or another. Woolfolk had a division leader who had a garage chockablock with vintage motorcycles including an Indian Scout, a Brough Superior, and an especially rare bike designed and built by Zeppo Marx in the late forties. This inspired Woolfolk to have his own collection.

Woolfolk had acquired three hundred or more opera records made of shellac by Pathé and Odeon in the early twentieth century. Being archaic and of limited usefulness were key attributes of the discerning gentleman's collection. It was like knowing Latin and classical Greek in former times. He boasted of collecting them through inheritance and diligence at auction houses and the occasional flea market. In truth, he acquired almost all of them on eBay in one fell bid.

The collection appreciated in value every year except after the 2008 crash, yet it never satisfied him. After giving it some thought he concluded it was because he didn't like

opera. He'd bought season tickets and was among the first to stand and applaud and call out, "Bravo! Bravo!" Nonetheless, there was no escaping that opera simply wasn't for him and that he'd have to find another adornment to his lifestyle and testament to his discernment.

A collection of war rugs appealed to him. He knew no one who even heard of such things and he could relish explaining their story and provenance to people both above and below his position with the firm. He could also feel as though he'd played a role in bringing down communism and spreading free markets across the world.

"Anthony, I want a large one for my living room. I think it'll tie the room together very well. The wife won't like it but she's up in New York most of the time. You know – investment banker type. The weaving is amazingly intricate on these things. True pieces of art. Quite an investment too, I should think. Enough on rugs. I have a think tank to run here and we got plans for Kurdistan, don't we. What's new with oil sales?"

"Hungary is buying Kurdish crude out of Ceyhan and other Eastern European countries may soon follow. Israel's buying too but it isn't a large consumer and it'll soon be an energy exporter thanks to offshore gas fields. Talks with China are still going on. Saudi oil's cheap now and the sulphur content is lower than Kurdistan's. That hurts pricing. Maybe a buck and a half per barrel off the Brent benchmark."

"Anything on the political front, Anthony?"

"Washington and Jerusalem are still pressing for Kurdish independence and for Syrian Kurds to align with it. It's a hard sell though. Landlocked countries are hard sells, especially in that part of the world."

Woolfolk nodded and looked at the map of the Middle East behind Anthony.

"I'm bringing in Barrett Parker from New Mexico to speak at the conference next week."

It took a moment for the name to register with Woolfolk and when it did, he frowned.

"Do we really need that Parker fellow here. He's rather, well, rather *outspoken*. No, he's ill-mannered. He's right at home in the New Mexico boondocks. Let's just keep him out there a little longer. You know, out there with the cactuses and *senoritas*."

"Yes, he's outspoken. He was a buck sergeant, not an officer. He had roughnecks from hardscrabble zip codes to keep in line and get back home. After that, he was an astute civilian consultant in Iraq not long after the insurgency erupted."

“You were a buck sergeant at one time, were you not, Anthony?”

“Yes, I was. Rangers. Then of course I was raised to a gentler condition through Officer Candidate School.” Anthony’s light sarcasm flew over Woolfolk’s head like stealth fighter jet with its engines flamed out. “Parker speaks his mind, but it’s a sharp mind and a practical mind. Good judgment on things in this world. That’s why I asked him up. He saw the breakup of the Middle East long before most people did up here in Washington. Or out in Langley, I might add.”

“I recall the article. ‘Syriana Redux’ was the title. Fair, I’d say. No more than that. He also saw Afghanistan breaking in two, and that hasn’t happened.”

“The Taliban might disagree with you there. They’ve taken a good portion of the south since that paper came out, pretty much like he said they would. I was at the conference. He and an assistant cabinet secretary almost came to blows. Well, in a fight between Parker and that guy, I’d put my money on Parker. He played hoops with some big boys in Chicago and lifted weights with some bigger ones. Knocked out an Iraqi tank or two at Medina Ridge, too. Then he went on to become an academic, of sorts.”

“Okay. We’ll see what the sage of the sagebrush has to say. No fights though, Anthony. This is a Washington think tank, not a Fort Bragg watering hole.” Woolfolk entered Parker’s name into an online database and hit search.

“I can keep him in line, Mr Woolfolk. That’s why I was a captain.” He stood to leave the director’s office then added, “Three ranger colonels were on Parker’s side at that conference, you know. The story has circulated far and wide in the military. It’s downright popular, at least in some quarters.”

“What quarters might those be?”

“Mr Woolfolk, it may not be obvious from the outside, but many people inside the military don’t think they’ve been used very wisely over the last fifteen years.”

Woolfolk nodded as he pondered the existence of a few outliers in a homogeneous institution. Tighter personnel policies could do wonders.

“Anthony, what’s that lapel pin you’re always wearing. I see it’s red, white, and blue, but we rather prefer the American flag here at the Project.”

Anthony had noticed the accessory of choice in the Project and among politicians and media people. To him, it didn’t betoken patriotism; it betrayed conformity. Anthony thought the distinction was becoming lost in the country, especially in Washington.

“It’s a Silver Star, Mr Woolfolk. Iraq, 2003. I was with *peshmergas*, in the north. It displays pride in America just as well as a flag pin does, if not a little better.” He thought about going on to say that anyone could buy a flag pin or put a magnetized yellow ribbon on their car.

“Oh, yes, of course. Well, it amounts to the same thing then. Oh, and thank you for your service, Anthony.”

Anthony paused before turning and heading to the hallway. That phrase rankled him – and it might have showed. It was hackneyed and there was almost never any authentic spirit in those who tossed it out like a penny for an old guy. It was “Have a nice day” for veterans, a verbal yellow ribbon, and at least as much an act of self-congratulation for one’s display of patriotism and magnanimity than an act of heartfelt appreciation.

Sometimes Anthony felt moments of distance from the elite of the town. This was one of them. Too privileged, too cozy, too untested in the fires overseas. Nonetheless, as he walked down the hall to his office he felt he’d strengthened his position with Woolfolk. He thought of his two-bedroom apartment in Silver Spring, furnished by things from Macy’s and a few catalogs, and how ridiculous his place would look with a room-sized Afghan war rug.

Woolfolk brushed a fleck of lint from a surgeon cuff and pulled up the Dun and Bradstreet financial report on Barrett Parker. His eyebrows rose a half inch.

The Del Lewis Radio Show

Del thrummed his fingers excitedly as the bumper music came up in his headphones. For over ten years he'd been using a once obscure Clapton instrumental called "Slunky" which had searing guitar licks fed through an echo loop. The tune was used in a few commercials now and was in regular rotation on classic rock stations.

Ol' Del took a tug from his glass of JTS Brown, neat, and waited for the sign from his producer in the booth. It came and it was showtime across the United States and on armed forces radio around the world.

"Welcome, my friends. Welcome to my humble little radio show. Ohhh . . . where or where to begin this afternoon. Did any of us ever think we'd see our country in this sad, sorry, pitiful state of affairs? I for one did not. I'm an optimist, especially when it comes to this great land of ours. But you know that. Nonetheless, looking around the country, fair-minded people will have to shake their head in complete and utter disbelief. Everywhere, our personal freedoms are at risk. Hell, many of them – too many of them – have already been lost. . . . Hopefully, not forever. It's up to us, my friends. It is up to us.

"The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have taken a turn for the worse. They were both going just fine a few years ago. Victory was in reach, until just a few years ago. Iran? They're making plutonium for a nuclear weapon again at a place called Arak. Not *I*-raq. *A*-rak. That nuclear deal didn't do a thing. And those Iranians are cracking down on the valiant Kurdish people who live under fear and tyranny in parts of *I*-ran. The administration isn't doing anything. We should have hit them years ago! Hard as hell too!

"Look over there in Russia. People thought the Big Bear was dead. No way, Ivan! He was just biding his time. Putin took Crimea and the eastern Ukraine and now he's looking elsewhere. Says he wants to protect Russian nationals. Says enemies are all around him. We heard something like that from Adolf Hitler long ago. Well, we got ourselves another Adolf Hitler now and looks like we got ourselves another Neville

Chamberlain, too. Yes, we have our own *appeaser-in-chief* sitting in the Oval Office. I'm going to mail him an umbrella so he looks more the part. That's it! We should *all* send an umbrella to 1600 Pennsylvania Ave! The man's a novice, a peacenik, an amateur! He thinks you can have world peace with a few kind words and a big grin. My friends, the world doesn't work that way. Never did, never will. Peace comes through strength and armed vigilance. But you know that.

"Anyhoo, our appeaser-in-chief, Neville Chamberlain, Jr, wants to slash defense budgets even more and pull our troops out of trouble spots. As if America has ever cut and run from danger! Hell no, it's not in our blood! Ask any general and they'll tell you we are heading for major trouble. Not in some far away place. Right here. Why? Because ISIL and Putin and the Red Chinese all take one look at Washington and see a scrawny weakling in the White House. We better change that and toody-sweet. Excuse my use of the French language. It just slipped out.

"Crime is out of control. Not just in our cities – those went to hell in a hand basket long ago, in the sixties. I don't have to tell you that cuz you're smart people and you know it already. You saw it yourself or your parents told you about it, probably in hushed tones. It's spread out like some sort of social ebola virus, infecting and plaguing and destroying our small towns and villages – bedrocks of our very way of life. It didn't used to be this way. No, it sure didn't used to be this way. Not where I grew up. Not where you grew up either.

"The mayors and leading citizens of these small towns come up to me and say, 'Del, we need help to fight all the crime that's breaking out here since that new guy became president. We're doing all we can but there's only so much in our power.' These proud men ask Washington for help and they see the national debt up around twenty trillion dollars. That's *trillion*, my friends. Starts with a *t* and an *r*, like '*trouble*' and '*travesty*.' There's just no money left, not even for the communities that made this nation great.

"Interest rates are on the rise and it's not hard to understand why. People don't trust the government with the debt and they're not lending Washington any more money. Red China is telling us they won't lend us another *yuan* unless we do something about the debt. And this time those Red Chinese have a good point. All that debt is squashing the little people like you and I. Something's got to be done. Something fast. Something drastic. Yes, something drastic has to be done and I don't care how it's done. I really don't.

"Then there's the stock market. . . . Yes, *trouble* there too. Americans look at all that debt and get scared. I don't blame them, do you? Course not. Three straight weeks of losses. Down 15%, no end in sight. If you don't believe ol' Del, just ask the experts. They'll all tell you the same thing. Yes, there are fat cats on Wall Street but that's

where the little people go too so's they can make their retirement years a little cozier. Now? Now, they're not so sure – and, my friends, neither am I. Neither am I. Down 15% . . . no end in sight.”

Del pounded his fist on the desk and paused. The producer gave him a thumbs up.

“I say that cuz I look at the crop of presidential wannabes in the campaign today and I ask where is the man we need to lead us? I hear the same question over and over when I go out and meet with the people who work everyday then come and watch the news and sit back in frustration and despair.

“And I’m not just talking about the other side. Wish I was. I wish *to hell* I was! I look at our side and see nothing but a bunch of jackanapes and mountebanks. Big words. What I mean to say is that they’re a bunch of monkeys and frauds. But you know that.

“We have more and more states talking about seceding from the United States. Forming their own union – one that they think would be more perfect. I don’t think I’m alone in thinking that secession might be the only way out of more incompetence like we’ve had over the last seven years. I can’t take it anymore! Hell, there’s nothing holding this once-proud nation together anyway!

“The secession people call me all the time and ask me to get on board. They say ol’ Del will give the movement what it needs, what it deserves. I’m not a fence sitter. Usually just thinking ‘bout an issue alongside my core beliefs, and *pow*, just like that, it comes to me. With secession, it’s tougher. It really is. Cuz I’m an American! But I can’t stand to see things as they are and if getting rid of a few states that are too far gone is what we need to do, then that’s what we need to do. I’ll tell you this: if that Valerie Roberts wins in November, then I’ll do what I think is best.

“If we go our own way, we could govern ourselves the way the Founders and the Good Lord intended, not the way a bunch of. . . Anyhoo, I don’t want to get in any more trouble with the FCC.

“Well, don’t despair. There’s a man out there. Maybe not in the current crop. Definitely not in the current crop. America has always had a great man rise to the occasion. Look into the pages of history. Just don’t look at the books your kids have in school cuz it ain’t gonna be there. No way, no how. Those things have been rewritten in a way to make you think we started every war in the world since 1776 and Custer had it comin’ at Little Big Horn.

“We need a man to step out from the crowd and set this country back on the right path. He’s out there, waiting, biding his time. When he steps forward, he’ll get my

respect, my vote, and my unconditional support. And I know he can count on yours too. Ol' Del knows he can count on you."

Del looked behind the glass and saw his producer smiling as he pointed to the lit-up phone bank. Del knew his rapport with the American people bordered on the messianic. He held up two fingers horizontally and a comely intern recharged his glass of JTS Brown, neat.

New Mexico

“C’mon, Jesse. We’re going to see Peter.”

With Barrett’s words, Jesse slowly pulled himself up from the six-by-four Navajo rug set out before the unlit fireplace, revealing the startling majesty of an immense Canadian Timberwolf. He stretched and shook his lean frame and trotted slowly to the door. Barrett hooked the leash on the wolf’s collar, grabbed a cylindrical-shaped paper bag, and headed outside.

The two guys walked gingerly over the cattle grate then down the two-lane blacktop lined with rusted barbed-wire fence from the forties and unhewn grass that had benefited from late summer rain. An occasional pickup slowed to get a look at the proud beast. Barrett got second billing, if that.

Peter Novotny, early nineties, lived by himself since his wife died four years earlier. His parents, Czechs from Rokycany and the White Mountain, had come to Cohoes in upstate New York around the turn of then century then headed for the silver mines of southwestern New Mexico. The mines down there were played out by the time the Depression hit and after losing two children, the family moved to Clovis, near the Texas line. Peter and his father did what he called “common labor,” which meant that if anyone had a truck that needed to be unloaded or a stretch of picket wire to be repaired, the Novotnys would take care of it. If at the close of a long day he and his father had a buck each to tuck into their dungarees, well, it was a damn good day and they’d be able to eat. There were other days, too.

Peter was drafted in late 1940, before the US was in the war. So malnourished was he that the medics looked at him twice before sending him ahead. He took basic at Ft Polk in Louisiana and waited for his year to be up so he could go back home and help out, even though he was sending most his pay back home. Thirty dollars a month it came to. The army gave him three square a day and a better bunk than he had in Clovis, so he didn’t need much jack.

“Over the Hill in October,” the boys would say, and scrawl “OHIO” on latrine walls. October was when the draft law expired and everybody thought they could head home. Americans wanted no part of another European war.

But war came and Peter put in for Officer Candidate School. A high school diploma was all he had but he was tall and getting strong and knew how to handle things, so off he went to Ft Benning, Georgia, which he and the others called “The Benning School for Boys,” as though it was a finishing school for the scions of the better families of the country and not a training ground for fighting the Japanese Empire and Third Reich.

Someone with a high school diploma back then could read and write as well as most college graduates today can and Peter became a second lieutenant. A proud one. He prized the photo of himself beaming dressed in gold bars and Sam Browne belt. He had become an officer in the tank corps and felt great things lay ahead for a boy who’d been doing common labor the previous year. Most of his pay was still mailed back home.

Peter was sitting on the porch of his two-bedroom rancher on a half acre of grassland and saw man and beast coming down the road from a half mile out. Making sure who it was with a pair of GI binoculars, he hobbled down to the gate and greeted them – a steak bone for Jesse, a handshake for Barrett, followed by a friendly salute that might have passed on a parade ground.

The two gents took seats on the porch near a round plastic table with two glasses and another paper bag. The great wolf lay down with his treat.

“So what you got there in the bag, Barry? Or ya gonna make me have a guess at it.”

“Why the two glasses, Peter? You know damn well what’s inside.”

“I guess I do. I guess I do at that.”

Barrett pulled out a bottle of Calvados, an apple brandy from France that Peter had apprised him of years earlier.”

“I ‘spose I told you about my first taste of this particular concoction.”

“I ‘*s*pose you’ll tell me it again. It’s part of the experience and I’d feel cheated if you didn’t.” Barrett uncorked the bottle and poured three ounces of the amber fluid into each glass. Jesse, over by the truck, showed no interest.

“Mid-August, 1944. My unit . . . you know what one that was, Barry?”

“G Company, 32nd Tank Battalion, Combat Command A, 3rd Armored Division. Norman Rose, commanding general.”

Peter nodded at Barrett’s report. “That’s the one. One minor correction. Leroy Watson was still in charge at the time. Rose came later. Poor guy was killed near Paderborn late in the war. Anyways, I’m glad you’re takin’ all this down. Anyhow, we roll into a Normandy town near Caen, went by the name of Cal-va-dos. They pronounce the “s” at the end for some reason. No Germans ‘round just then an’ I’m thankful of that.

“Out come the villagers, just like in the newsreels they used to show in theaters and on TV. Dancin’ and carryin’ on like Maurice Chevalier was singin’ *La Marseillaise* with Charles de Gaulle on piano. One gal clambers up my Sherman and hands me a glass of what I thought was just apple cider. Bein’ a hot dusty day with the Shermans kickin’ up some fierce dust on those dirt roads, I take a swallow. I knew in a second it wasn’t cider and I *damn* near fell down into the crew compartment. My boys thought a sniper put a round through me. A round of Calvados was more like what hit me. And that’s how a poor boy from New Mexico became acquainted with an exotic brandy from a land far away. How in the hell else could I’ve seen France but for that war. Same with you and Iraq, I reckon.”

“I guess. Never thought I’d stand along the banks of the Euphrates River and skim stones along its smooth surface. A couple of Iraqi kids showed me they could do it better. After you told me that Calvados story, I learned to appreciate something to drink besides Guinness.”

“There are worse things to drink. Calvados might have morva kick to it than Guinness, though.”

“I’d say so. Was the village of Calvados where you almost ran over George Patton?”

“Naw. Probably a week or two later, during the run ‘cross France. He was directing traffic at a crossroads, pearl-handled pistol on his hip, a camera crew not far away. Suddenly he walked out in front of my Sherman and held up his hand like a cop on main street. Saw him in the nick of time. Damn near ran him over. Damn near did.”

“You didn’t care much for him, as I recall.”

“You recall things well, Barry. That’s why I tell you these stories. No one else much cares anymore. Patton . . . he slapped those boys in Sicily. If’n he slapped one of my boys I don’t know what I’d do. I surely don’t. Might be in Leavenworth t’this day.”

“I hear the Leavenworth cafeteria doesn’t serve Calvados on a regular basis. I’d bring you some on visitors day, though.”

“Thoughtful of ya, Barry. Maybe a file too? We had two types of soldiers back then. Some saw the war as a job they had to do, t’others came to love war. Like they’d found something inside them that fit with that ugliness goin’ on all ‘round, and it grew and grew. Ike and Bradley didn’t like war. Ike looked like a high school principal out in Moriarty or some such place, and Bradley looked more like a guy runnin’ a hardware store than an army. They’re gone now. Long time.”

“Which was Patton?”

“Well now, I believe George Patton was t’other type. Closest thing we had to an aristocrat. What was it you said the French called their big shots?”

“*Noblesse d’epée*. The nobility of the sword.”

“*Noblesse d’epée* . . . aristocrats who yearn for war, whether it’s needed or not.”

The men took cautious sips of the brandy which they took neat. The shade had chilled it nicely in the 7000-foot altitude. What the breeze took off them, the brandy more than put back in.

Barrett poured another inch into each glass.

“Salut!”

“Salut!”

“Well Peter, we know what was in my bag. What’s in the one you got there.”

Peter opened the bag and pulled out a brown canvas pistol belt wrapped around a leather holster. He opened the holster revealing the grip of a pistol, then tugged out a vintage M1911 automatic. He released the magazine which had a few aged .45 rounds in it, pulled back the slide to show the empty chamber, and handed it to Barrett.

“I sense another story coming on, Peter. One I haven’t heard before.”

“Naw . . . I don’t guess you have. I don’t tell this one much. Not since the war. Not since that day, really. It ain’t one you tell your family cuz if you do, they’re never gonna look at you the same. They prefer to think of wars in nicer ways.”

“Like joyful villagers coming out to greet the Yanks with flowers.”

“Yeah. Like that. It’s all true but there’s more. Most guys who might hear this story would be all proud of me and wanna shake my hand and say how glad they were to know me. So . . . so I don’t tell it much.”

Peter took a generous swig of Calvados and looked out on the Sandias for a moment. He was solemn though not emotional.

“A few weeks before making my acquaintance with this potable, we were at St Lo. There was a huge bombing run just ahead of us. Hundreds of bombers. Earth shook like there was an earthquake goin’ on beneath our feet. Had to cover our ears on accounts of the air pressure. Truth told, they done the same thing the day before, ‘cept the bombs fell on the wrong place and they killed a bunch of GIs.”

“Including a general named Lesley McNair.”

“You know of that day then, Barry?”

“Operation Cobra was the name. Drawn up by Collins and Bradley and Hodges. It tore up the German lines and shortened the war.”

“It might’ve. Never trusted official histories much. Well, we move out after the bombing stops. We didn’t think anyone could’ve lived through it, but out they come. A squad over here, a Tiger over there. It was the Panzer Lehr Division, the pride of the Wehrmacht, that had been underneath all that hell. And parts of it lived through it somehow. Dug in deep, I guess. Orders said don’t take ‘em on. Keep goin’ and gut their lines – and head for the Siegfried Line and Germany.

“So we come to a hedgerow and only way to get through them things was to rip it up with .50 cal fire. A few hundred rounds later, we rolled through the gap an’ we had *just* rolled through it when off to the right I see a German boy, all o’ nineteen. He was heftin’ a Panzerfaust, which was capable of blowing a damn good hole in my Sherman. We look at each other for maybe five, six seconds, seemed like more, an’ it mighta *been* more, but time don’t always run at the same speed, no matter what they tell us. I pull that .45 from my shoulder harness and shoot ‘im, five times. The boy goes down . . . the Panzerfaust hittin’ the ground ‘long with ‘im. More dust kicks up.”

Peter took another swig. Barrett did not. It was no war story. There was no boastfulness at all in Peter’s voice and no lingering remorse either. It was something he had to do long ago and had come to grips with long ago too. He wanted someone to

know of that day and that the war wasn't all joyous villagers showering garlands on victorious, unbloodied GIs.

"I wanted to look to the boy . . . but . . . we had those orders to keep goin'. I said that already. The boy wasn't SS. Mighta felt different if he was. Regular Wehrmacht. All of nineteen. Anyhow, there wasn't any doubt in my mind. None t'all. On we go . . . and a great victory was won that day, like the poet says."

Barrett released the slide and eased it down without making a racket. He sighted along the horizon and thought of the Iraqi tanks he'd put HEAT rounds through in the desert at Medina Ridge. More boys all of nineteen. Often enough he'd look out from the foothills of the Sandias while on a walk with Jesse and see burning Iraqi tanks on the dry plains leading out to Tucumcari and that burned corpse, hand raised pointlessly to the sky. He knew he'd have dreams of Iraq that night, and the next few nights, too.

"I want you to have my pistol when I go on, Barry. All yours. You are the official keeper of Peter Novotny's memories and memorabilia."

"I'll take care of both, Peter. Count on it."

"I am. I am countin' on you. Wars have a funny way of gettin' all sentimental in old guys' minds. They tell stories to kids and it goes on and on. That's why I was never one for veteran lodges. Good fellows an' all, though. They just tell too many damn stories and most of 'em sound like tall tales to me."

Jesse looked up from his bone near Peter's pickup and studied the two men on the porch briefly before getting back to more important things.

"Pete, you ever dream about those days anymore? The war years, I mean."

"Did for many a year. Twenty? Twenty-five? Now, it's only seldom. And it don't have the bite it once had. Like thinking about a girl who broke your heart in high school. The memory's there but it don't bite no more. . . . Now wait, Barry. I did have a dream a few weeks ago. I seen some of my boys from G Company. Damnedest thing. They were all still young. Glad to see me and called me 'cap'n' and 'sir' like back in the war. They asked where I'd been and how come I was so old an' they weren't. Damnedest thing. . . ."

Barrett leaned over and clasped Peter's shoulder.

"Time and tide wait for no one, Barry. Time and tide."

Washington, DC

Borden Woolfolk strode into the conference room and called the executive meeting to order. It wasn't to be run by Robert's Rules of Order. Woolfolk just liked to establish his authority through whatever procedures and symbols were at hand and enjoyed the looks of deference from staff. The conference room, which was adjacent to his office, featured a mahogany table around which sat ten Project luminaries. Some were on the board, some were high rollers. They leafed through the packets of papers before them even after Woolfolk spoke.

"We've all seen the statistics. They're in the news everyday, and they aren't encouraging. All our side's candidates are languishing in the polls. They tear into one another on the trail and in the debates. Frankly, they all look like losers to me and we got to get a strong candidate – and *fast*. The convention's a week away and it's shaping up like a fight at Michael Vick's place."

He thought a little coarseness showed that even though he was in an Italian suit, he was a rough and tumble player. He looked around the room and took in the obligatory mirth.

"Meanwhile, the other side is far less divided and stays on message. Former secretary of state Valerie Roberts is going to be coronated at her party's lovefest and she beats any of our candidates by five to nine points in head-to-head competition. Ladies and gentlemen, what the hell's wrong with our candidates? What the hell are we missing?"

One voice said the better sort of person didn't want to get involved in the long, arduous process that included everybody digging into their private lives and talking with old girlfriends and neighbors and drinking buddies and business partners. Woolfolk nodded quietly. He knew that the Project had a dozen people looking into Valerie Roberts's past. Indeed, he'd pumped over three hundred thousand dollars into the effort. A dry hole so far.

Another voice said the current crop was made up of nothing but lightweights. “Duds,” as he put it. One could still catch on. That’s what the consultants are hired to do: make a lightweight look a heavyweight champ. It could still be done.

Woolfolk shook his head.

“I don’t want to entrust the future of the United States to a lightweight that the consultants ply with steroids then teach to go for the groin. Pardon my less than delicate wording, Leela.”

“Not a problem,” a dark-featured young woman replied. “And I agree, the hour is late but we should try to bring in another candidate.”

Leela Khamseh had come aboard the Project a year ago, was a rising star in the New American Leadership wing, and was increasingly active in the campaign. She was an Iranian-American, born in Tehran not long before the 1979 revolution, with a PhD in political science from the University of Chicago. Her dissertation won the EE Schattschneider Award of the American Political Science Association – a prestigious professional group that Leela saw no point in joining.

Tall and athletic, graceful and sensual, she caught eyes in town, though she avoided most of the soirées. The natural sheen of her lengthy black hair required the help of no commercial product. A significant nose might caution some, but for most people it gave her a confident look. She had innate confidence, not the contrived pose of most professionals. Her mother was a Persian art teacher, her father an officer from a tribal region in the southwest who’d risen to general, despite not being Persian.

She’d been in the Olin Institute at Chicago, but not the Straussian priesthood of the political philosophy world. No one in the Project or most of the other think tanks really knew who Leo Strauss and his acolytes were. They just knew they should admire them and nod thoughtfully on any mention of the long-deceased German emigre’s name. The other side’s think tanks didn’t know much about Straussians either. They just knew that they were evil because they justified lying to the public, even about war.

Since coming to Washington after teaching a few years here and there, Leela didn’t think politicians required any understanding of Plato or Strauss to justify lying. It came to them naturally and demanded no philosophical underpinning for legitimacy. That was conferred by getting ahead.

Leela thought Straussians were lousy dates. She went out with one, once. He spoke to her as though they were in a dialog, he the all-knowing Socrates, she the less-gifted Thrasymachus. She concluded the cheerless, fruitless outing by asking if finding new

things in Plato was a sign the previous twenty-three centuries of scholars were dolts, or a sign modern scholars make stuff up to legitimize their jobs. Leela said she was amenable to either and added they were not mutually exclusive. The evening ended early.

Leela stood before the Project's executive committee. Everyone looked intently, even more so than when Woolfolk spoke. A clipboard was at her side, more as a prop as she'd meticulously prepared her presentation the previous night and during the drive in from her Foggy Bottom condo.

"Americans don't like lawyers. I doubt that will surprise anyone here. Nor will it call for elaboration. I hope none of us will be offended by this; the polling data are tediously clear on the matter. Business leaders don't do well either. The public's still smarting from the 2008 meltdown and the continuing concentration of wealth. Professional politicians – by which I mean members of congress and governors – fare even worse. Yes, people like their own elected officials but that isn't helpful when trying to elect one to the White House."

"Colonel Qaddafi and Joseph Stalin poll better in Libya and Russia today than our elected officials do," one man quipped, bringing a moment of levity to the otherwise downbeat meeting.

"And Putin's at 80% after moving into Crimea and the Eastern Ukraine," added another, though not in jest.

Leela accepted the comments good-naturedly and extended both hands to her sides, index fingers out until the chuckling ebbed.

"I wonder if there isn't something lurking in these points that's relevant to the Project's goals. Yes, the public dislikes politicians, lawyers, and business people. Those are the facts, and though they may be regrettable, ignoring them will not help us. Several occupations score well: doctors, teachers, and religious leaders. Can you think of one figure from these ranks that could be elected president?"

Leela looked about the room and saw colleagues mulling over the question.

"What about Everett Willis Keller? He's a wonderful and articulate fellow," came one voice. A few of the others looked about uneasily and Leela was glad for it.

"I agree," she replied, though with little enthusiasm for the televangelist with a nationwide cable network and a devoted and generous flock. "Decent and articulate, indeed. However, Keller's negatives are through the steeple, and among independent women they reach the high heavens. He scares people with his call for a new crusade

and talk of the end of days coming soon. Presidents point to a bright future, not an imminent apocalypse.”

Woolfolk fidgeted in his chair and riffled his papers noisily. “Excuse me, Leela, you led us to believe there was some hope for the campaign. Please tell us there’s hope for the nation.” He wanted her to make her point and not lecture dull students.

“That brings us to another highly regarded occupation.” She paused to see if any thoughts were gelling in the group. Politics and business they knew, history they didn’t. Moments of awkward silence followed.

“The military,” someone at last ventured. Several nods followed and the room looked upon her with keener interest.

“Yes, the military. Specifically *generals*. Lawyers and business are . . . well, too dry and rational and legalistic. Too *uninspiring*. The public wants energy, idealism, honor, nobility.”

“But the public doesn’t like wars much these days. How can they find a general inspiring?”

The point was received with nods. Eyes turned to Leela.

“No doubt about that, gentlemen. The public doesn’t like wars, at least not right now, especially if their children are involved. But their children by and large have *not* been involved in over forty years and the opposition to the war back then – during the Vietnam War – entailed so much hostility to the military that there’s reluctance to revisit those days. No one dares to criticize the military today, only the wars. Our generals are unscathed, unsullied, and untouched. In the public’s eye, they remain professional, able, honorable, and *above politics*.

“So they have teflon helmets!”

Brief smiles for a small joke.

“Does this outlook of yours have anything to do with your father?”

Leela disliked the suggestion she was driven by a girlish fawning over a deceased parent. “My father was an Iranian general in the days of the shah. That’s on my bio. My argument is based on statistics, not paternal fealty – or nostalgia for the Pahlavi dynasty, brief though it was.” She hoped they would understand the word ‘fealty’ by context.

“Will Americans accept a general as their president?” Woolfolk asked.

The others nodded again and looked to her for a response. They’d walked into her sights.

“The question, gentlemen, is when have the American people *not* accepted a general as their president?” Leela was prepared for that question and had a polished retort committed to memory. “When in this country’s two-hundred-and twenty-seven years of proud history have they *not* accepted a general as their president. When have they *not* been enthralled by a man in uniform basking in the aura of martial virtue and shining victory. Shall I list them?”

She looked about the room as though the question was sincere when in truth it was a stepping stone to her next lines. She felt like a prosecutor in front of a sympathetic jury, a preacher before a deferent congregation. She was at her best and everyone there knew it. She started in before anyone had time to form a reply.

“George Washington, William Henry Harrison, Andrew Jackson, Franklin Pierce, Zachary Taylor, Ulysses S Grant, Rutherford B Hayes, James Garfield, Chester A Arthur, Benjamin Harrison, and Dwight Eisenhower. That’s eleven, gentlemen. Khamseh's Eleven, one might say. I could name a few colonels too. And how many presidents were elected, at least to some extent, on their war records? We’ve all heard of San Juan Hill, I’m sure. Perhaps some of your fathers sported a PT-109 tie clasp in high school.”

Leela suddenly realized that no one in the room would admit to that.

“It all goes back to Rome and the legion commanders.” A man nodded, proud of his historical knowledge. Knowledge of the democracies of Antiquity was encouraged at the Project as they saw it as the optimal form of representative government when notables handled public affairs.

“Tippecanoe too,” someone added.

“Good point.” Leela held back from pointing out that Tippecanoe had been won by the elder Harrison. She paused and appreciated the impressed faces before her. She ran down the presidents’ names in her head to make sure she hadn’t forgotten one. She thought of noting that Colin Powell could have been president but she’d already made her point well. Besides, Powell wasn’t especially revered at the Project anymore.

“Alright, Leela. I commend you for your expertise and oratory. No, I *salute* you for it!” Woolfolk made a desultory salute and everyone else took the cue. “But isn’t the

campaign too far along for a newcomer, especially someone without organization and, well, money?"

"Not too late. Not too late at all. Reagan entered late in the 1976 campaign and damn near beat Ford. Same with Jerry Brown the same year; he had Carter scared. Yes, Reagan and Brown ultimately lost, but Ford and Carter had commanding leads. No one in our fold can make that claim today. They're all in the middle of a large, uninspiring pack. And as for money, it's been drying up because there's no one worth backing. A man with vision and rows of decorations will bring the money back. No one wants a convention fight, we can convince them to concede to a promising general – with the help of our donors, of course."

A heretofore silent figure spoke up.

"A general would be the most effective critic of the president's weakness in world affairs, defense cuts, and over-reliance on diplomacy and international organizations. Everyone else sounds too partisan, too ill-informed, too programmed by consultants. Generals are powerful symbols of national unity. We need one today to put a stop to the separatist movements in the South and West. And a general would be able to see our Middle Eastern agenda through."

"And Operation Renew America, too."

Woolfolk sent that man a reproveful glance and he looked away, acknowledging his breach of the Project's compartmentalization of Renew America.

Looks of hope and purposefulness replaced the downcast countenances of only fifteen minutes ago. Leela was relieved that another person was helping make her points. The Middle Eastern agenda caused her momentary concern.

"An outstanding presentation, Leela. Absolutely top drawer." Woolfolk was as buoyed as the others, if not more so. "Please indulge one more question, though. Do you have anyone in mind?"

Everyone in the room had been asking the same question and most had a name in mind. They looked to Leela Khamseh for her answer. Her previous presentations had been polished and well-paced and they knew she must have someone in mind.

"I presume we've all heard of General Walton Ambrose Hillock. And if I may presage your next question, Mr Woolfolk, he's at Centcom headquarters in Florida, even as we speak." She loved that charming archaism.

Woolfolk looked at his iPhone and opened an app that handled airline reservations.

“He’s going to be on the Del Lewis Show in about half an hour,” came one voice. Heads turned to see who was admitting he listened to talk radio while at the Project.

They went back to their offices and searched for a web stream. Woolfolk sent out for pizza and took a Diet Coke from the office fridge. He put his feet up on the desk, looked for smudges on the tips of his Alden cap toes, and admired his Afghan war rug.

The Del Lewis Show

The Clapton bumper music that usually began the show was replaced with “America the Beautiful.” After making sure the mike wasn’t hot, Del took a tall gulp of JTS Brown and let out a lengthy “Ahhhh.” He kept rhythm with his Mont Blanc pen then looked to his producer. The music went down and Del came up. He was far less jovial and bombastic. The change of tone, he knew, would signal his millions of listeners that today’s show had greater importance than most.

“My friends, I am the biggest optimist there is. If you’re a regular listener, you know that. I hear the gloom-and-doomers and baby-boomers and I just shrug my shoulders and say they don’t know the American people. Not the way I know I’ve come to know them since I started this humble little show long ago on a thousand-watt station in Richland, Washington.

“The news I’m hearing now . . . well, it’s even getting ol’ Del down. There’s trouble a plenty right here at home. No doubt about that. But it’s the news coming in from overseas that’s troubling me. No, it’s more than just troubling. It’s downright frightening. I say that because our brave young men – and *women*, don’t let me forget them – aren’t being allowed to fight the wars in Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan the way the experts say they should be fought. And by ‘experts’ I sure don’t mean the Washington and Boston *intellectuals* who claim to be strategic thinkers. I’m talking about the generals, the professionals, the men who know how to get things done in a dangerous world. But you know that.

“Look what’s going on over there. Arab murderers on the march across the whole damn place and they’re starting here now. Our generals say we need ground troops over in the Middle East but the administration – the *all-knowing* administration – says no, we don’t. Well, look what happened in Afghanistan last week. Three more districts fell to the bad guys. Two in Helmand province and the third . . . well, in one of the others. I can’t keep them straight.

“Fortunately, we have someone here with us who *can* keep them straight and has been getting them straight since we jumped on the Taliban with both boots right after 9/11. I have on the line for you none other than General Walton Ambrose Hillock. General Hillock, sir, this is indeed an honor for me.”

“Del, the honor’s all mine.” The general launched right in, his voice conveying affability and confidence. “There are some who’d say I’ve crossed a line by coming on your program but I’ve been an avid fan for some time and I want to show it. Oh, I’m tied up during the day as you can imagine, but I try to listen in from time to time as best I can. It helps me know what the American people have on their minds. And of course I had the pleasure of meeting you two years ago when I was a division commander and you were kind enough to fly halfway across the world and visit a base I had the privilege of commanding in Helmand province.”

“Well, sir, I got that name right!”

“Indeed you did, Del. And your visit had an inestimable effect on the spirits of our brave young men and women.”

“You’re too kind, sir. Too kind by a country mile. General Hillock, let’s get right down to cases ‘cuz I know you’re a busy man. The news is filled with reports that you want boots on the ground to fight the Taliban in A-stan and ISIL in Syria and Iraq.”

The general chuckled a bit. “Well, I guess it’s no secret that I’ve had my differences with the administration. Just about every general has. It’s part of the tension in American civil-military relations that has been with us since our founding. And it’s not necessarily a bad thing. It’s part of our history, part of who we are.”

“But sir, you’re not answering the question about boots on the ground. General Hillock, you’ll forgive ol’ Del for saying so, but you’re starting to sound like a politician! What’s going on over there? Can the local troops do the job or not?”

Del knew the general’s pause indicated a shift in mood. Years of radio gave him a sixth sense on what his guests were thinking, even though he almost never saw their faces. “America wants to know your answer. Sir, America *needs* to know your answer. We live in exceptional times and we need exceptional leadership.” Del thought to himself how skilled he was at wheedling an answer from cautious guests. Behind the glass Del’s producer pumped his fist and the crew looked at each other in gleeful anticipation.

“Del, we’ve armed and trained the local troops and they’re doing outstanding jobs. They really are. Our airpower is doing outstanding work too. Nonetheless . . .

nonetheless, there will come a time when we have to bring back US ground troops to do the job right and protect the American people.”

“Do you think the appeaser-in-chief will accept your professional judgment and authorize boots on the ground?”

The pause was uncomfortable. Radio producers hate a pause and call it “dead air.” Listeners are put off and often change the station. Often, not always. Del’s listeners hung on every millisecond. They knew where ol’ Del stood on the question. They eagerly awaited the general’s response.

Hillock thought carefully about his next words. He knew the president would never accede to ground troops and he also knew he wouldn’t be able to put up with White House meddling much longer. Nor did he care much for the host’s comments about sounding like a politician, though it was more of a jibe at the political class than the military one. Ire was building, and since getting his fourth star, he was unaccustomed to backing down.

“Del, neither the president nor the dilettantes around him have a proper understanding of military matters.” His words were measured. His voice covered both ire and restraint. “How can they? We need a firmer hand in the White House. I’m afraid he’s simply not up to the job of providing for the nation’s defense. Nor do I see anyone on the horizon who is up to the job. There, have I crossed another line?”

Del saw his producer raise his arms to signal touchdown. The crew slapped noiseless high fives.

Del beamed proudly, knowing the import of the general’s words. “Sir, I think you strode across a whole river! Maybe walked on water too! And the American people are glad you did, sir. Thank you, sir. Thank you for your service and thank you for plain talk in exceptional times.”

Back in the Project there was audible cheering and laughter from many offices. Woolfolk and a few staffers were elated. He checked the newswires for responses and couldn’t wait to see how the media handled it. Alerts were popping up on his phone.

Anthony Sabatini was emailing a PUK commander in Kurdistan and hadn’t been listening to the radio. A friend texted him the news. Anthony instantly knew that Hillock had just gone too far. His military career was over and a new one beginning.

The navy and the president

The Iranian destroyer *Shahid Qandi*, and its supply vessel *Kharg*, exit Bandar-e-Abbas and sail past several islands then into the Strait of Hormuz, passing seven giant oil tankers in less than two hours. Some were sailing into the Gulf unladen, others were low in the water and headed for China with millions of barrels of crude. The Iranian ships pass into the Arabian Sea, though of course the Iranians didn't call it that any more than the Saudis referred to the body of water the ships just departed from as the "Persian" Gulf.

They were being followed, and rather closely, ever since they neared the Strait. It was to be expected. The Iranian ships were tailed by a frigate and submarine of the US navy. It was all part of the game they'd played since the Iran-Iraq War. A vital part of the game was to make sure that both sides keep it a game and avoided an "incident."

A hundred miles to sea, the American ships back off and return to the Strait of Hormuz. An E-2 Hawkeye reconnaissance plane remains watchful, keeping a twenty-five nautical mile distance, and monitoring communication. The Iranian ships picked up the Hawkeye and calculate that it had come from the Prince Sultan airbase in southern Saudi Arabia.

US intelligence agencies – the Office of Naval Intelligence and CIA foremost among them – try to assess what the two ships are up to. In a matter of hours a consensus emerges. The ships are headed to North Yemen to deliver arms to the Houthi rebels – the Shia group that swooped down from the arid region along the Saudi border and took the capital of Sanaa before driving south toward Aden. The intelligence community worried greatly about the Houthis, though there were junior analysts who thought this misguided. They saw the Houthis as the most powerful enemy of ISIL and al Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula. If not bound for North Yemen, ONI and CIA reports went on, the ships were on their way to the Sudan, where they would unload their cargo to be smuggled to Hamas and Hisbollah.

But *Shahid Qandi* and *Kbarg* sail past Yemen, and a day later past the Sudan, before entering the Suez Canal. Halfway between Ismailia and Port Said, the Canal Authority releases a communiqué stating that the Iranian ships are headed into the Eastern Mediterranean as part of a goodwill mission. ONI and CIA are more sure than ever that its goals are sinister. The ships are undoubtedly headed for Beirut or to the Syrian port of Tartus where Russia has a naval base and where they will deliver arms to the embattled Assad government.

The president hears of the ONI and CIA reports in the morning briefing. There is a sensitive dialog underway between the US and Iran. The secretary of state and Iran's foreign minister were meeting in Montreux to discuss the removal of remaining sanctions on Iran and the countries' unacknowledged cooperation in fighting ISIL. The White House doesn't want anything to spoil the talks.

The president orders the navy to back off. The directive travels from the Oval Office to the Secretary of Defense and Chief of Naval Operations before going to Sixth Fleet Headquarters in Naples. The orders are to cease forthwith any and all tailing operations by surface ships or submarines. Reconnaissance aircraft are to fly no closer than twenty-five nautical miles.

Less than hour after the Iranian ships exit the Canal at Port Said, they are picked up by the destroyer *USS Bulkeley* and the attack submarine *USS Newport News*. They trail the Iranian ships by two nautical miles, sometimes closer. Older hands recall doing the same with Soviet ships in the past.

An F/A-18 Super Hornet launches from the deck of *USS Theodore Roosevelt* in the Aegean Sea. Mighty wisps of steam rise from the pistons of the catapult and in an instant dissipate in the swirling winds. The jet flies low above the Mediterranean and heads toward an area west of Port Said.

No more than five hundred feet off the deck, it avoids the small fishing vessels below as much as possible. The pilot shuts off the burners shortly after launch but even regular exhaust at that altitude kicks up spectacular twenty-foot walls of seawater. The fishermen are in awe as the fighter thunders over them in a blink of the eye and the ensuing five-foot wake rocks their small wooden crafts. The fishermen are angry. Their children think it's great fun and wave to the plane as it swiftly disappears on the horizon.

"Skipper, the Iranian ships are about five minutes away . . . they see us on their radar now. Are you sure about their rules of engagement out here?"

"Nope."

“That’s what I thought. Iran is Shia, right?”

“I thought they were mostly Scientologists.”

“Ha! I get them confused myself.”

“Sorry to interrupt the religion lesson but I got a visual. We’re heading for the destroyer. How do ya say ‘Duck, you sonsuvbitches’ in Farsi?”

“Pretty sure it’s the same as in English. Damn near universal, I’d say.”

“Makes me proud to be an American.”

“No singing, please.”

The crews of *Shahid Qandi* and *Kharg* had been alerted by radar and are watching their starboard sides as they sail west toward the glowing red horizon. They see the geysers of water kicking up, then hear the booms as the American plane relights its afterburners and breaks the sound barrier. The ships’ captains are uncertain if it’s a plane or a ship-killing cruise missile. Radar says it’s an F/A-18, but captains are responsible for the lives of their crews, and they worry. They order the gun crews to hold fire. The object is five hundred meters out and heading right for *Shahid Qandi*. The crews of both ships hold their breaths.

So does the crew of the F/A-18, right after they shout, “Duck, you sonsuvbitches!”

The jet shrieks not thirty meters in front of the destroyer’s bridge, sending sailors down to the deck. The flambeau from the twin engines blisters paint, thumps the Plexiglas, and leaves sailors coughing from the acrid JP-8 exhaust.

Angered, the captains order the 23mm guns to open fire. They know the plane was too fast and too far away, but they wanted to send a message. They will fire on any American plane that comes that close again. The destroyer captain signals Bandar-e-Abbas about what had just happened.

Word of the incident reaches the president not long after the Iranian foreign minister rebukes his American counterpart at Montreux. He does so publicly and the story makes it to the cable news stations. The public is excited to see a new drama unfolding.

The president is livid. When he discovers that the plane had been launched from *Theodore Roosevelt*, he orders the defense secretary to relieve the captain of his command immediately. The secretary of state tells his Iranian counterpart of the imminent dismissal and adds that a helicopter will take the captain off the carrier forthwith. He is satisfied. The talks resume.

The Chief of Naval Operations and Sixth Fleet commander issue no such order. The skipper of *Theodore Roosevelt* remains aboard ship and in command. The destroyer *Bulkeley* and attack submarine *Newport News* continue to shadow the Iranian vessels by two nautical miles, sometimes closer.

The Project and Kurdistan

Anthony and the director met briefly just before the meeting. They finalized the agenda, though Woolfolk was holding back. Woolfolk asked if Barrett Parker had checked in yet and Anthony said he hadn't. Woolfolk was pleased. As they headed for the seminar room, the discussion touched on Hillock's appearance on the Del Lewis Show a few days earlier.

"Anthony, you know how the military works. What's going to happen to General Hillock?"

"I don't think he'll be at Centcom much longer. The White House wants to be rid of him and anyone who speaks out that boldly has about had it with their job anyway. A White House aide is probably talking to him about now down in Tampa. It'll go something like this: you've made many valuable contributions and the president has always valued your service as well as your candor. However, we feel it's time for –"

"A fresh set of eyeballs? New challenges?"

"Something like that. The general will say he was honored to have served the president and despite their differences, he always respected him."

"So it's a lot like being fired, except they don't tell you that being canned is opening new opportunities to you."

Anthony mused as he recalled similar words from his section leader as he left Langley for the last time, escorted by security past the stars on the wall, his belongings in a small file box.

Woolfolk and Anthony sat at the dais and watched as two dozen people began to take their seats. A few greeted each other quietly; most simply took their seats. There were a few people from the US intelligence community, the lawyer who handled the Kurds' public relations in town, and a military attaché from the Israeli embassy. People from

the Turkish and Iraqi embassies requested invites but were told that the meeting was already too crowded.

A tall, athletically-built man entered carrying a worn cordovan leather briefcase. His disheveled hair contrasted with his three-button navy suit accented by a burgundy tie, though his shirt cuffs were not as well placed outside the jacket as sartorial norms dictated. As he neared the dais, Woolfolk felt uneasy and wondered how he got past security. Anthony saw the First Gulf War lapel pin and figured out who it was. Writing style, analytic bite, and appearance were all of a piece.

“Barrett Parker? Anthony Sabatini here. Good to see you and thanks for coming up.”

“Thanks for having me. Where should I sit?”

“On the left, I’d say.” Woolfolk’s words were brusque.

Each looked at the other – countenance, hair, attire, fingernails – and saw something alien, wearisome, and offensive. Neither could hide it, not from one another, not from everyone in the room. Neither cared to.

“Left and right mean very little when it comes to national security and the lives of soldiers. I stand with them.” Barrett and Woolfolk stared at each other for an uncomfortable moment.

“We can all agree on that,” Anthony diplomatically offered.

Woolfolk called the meeting to order and thanked everyone for their presence.

“We know that the Kurds should have been granted their own state after the First World War, and we know that with the Middle East breaking apart almost exactly a hundred years later, the Kurds will not let another opportunity slip away. We cannot postpone justice another century. Unlike the days after 1918, the Kurds are well armed and have strong and reliable allies in and out of the region. I’m proud to say the Project is one of their important stalwart allies.”

Barrett cringed at the unctuous and programmatic prose. He pondered who was behind the Project and a slew of names and groups came readily to mind, most of them less than honorable in his estimation.

Anthony took over and called upon a guest from Iraqi Kurdistan who stepped up to the dais and gave a detailed account of oil production. It was up handsomely over the last two years and reaching foreign markets through the Turkish port of Ceyhan. Many buyers were wary. The Baghdad government had legal claim on the oil but with

something that coveted, people will not look too closely at the country of origin. Hungary and Israel were buying, and tankers were shutting off their beacons and unloading their cargo somewhere in Asia. Vietnam? China?

The Kurdish presenter discussed the sizes and abilities of various Kurdish militias in Syria, Turkey, Iraq, and Iran. Their professionalism was said to be outstanding. The Israeli military attaché and a few others looked skeptical.

The presentation lasted a full forty minutes and concluded with a call for the US to end its policy of heeding Baghdad's dubious claims and to buy oil from a longstanding ally that had much to offer.

Woolfolk asked Anthony to say a few words. He thanked the director and began his own talk about the military potentials in the Kurdish regions.

“The Kurds have battled all comers over the years. Empires and states have failed to defeat them. Nor could they extinguish their language and culture. This is because the Kurds have fielded determined *guerrilla* forces. As statehood arrives, however, the Kurds must build a unified *conventional* army. This will serve several purposes. It will defend the Kurds from enemy conventional forces such as the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant. It will defend the economic assets of the country. And perhaps most importantly, the army will begin the process of reducing parochial tribal identities and building a national identity, just as armies and wars built national identities in the United States, Britain, and France.”

Questions and comments ensued, but Woolfolk limited discussion and promised a “free for all” at the end of the presentations. Anthony introduced the next topic and presenter: Barrett Parker on the potential for a united Kurdistan.

“A government in northern Iraq began after the First Gulf War when the US aircap prevented Saddam Hussein from reestablishing control. This was the beginning of the Kurdish state, just as the Declaration of Independence was for the United States.

“The civil war in Syria has given the Kurds there the chance to seize autonomy. However, Syrian Kurds are tied more closely to their Turkish cousins than to their Iraqi ones. Nonetheless, the prospects of an alignment are real and alignment today can lead to unification tomorrow. Bringing the Kurds of other countries will prove more difficult. Iraqi and Syrian Kurds have benefited from the collapse of power in their countries. Collapses are not in the offing elsewhere. Accordingly, the potential of a united Kurdistan will be limited to northern Iraq and portions of Syria.”

Barrett paused before going on with cautions about Kurdish factionalism and the potential for fighting between them. Woolfolk didn't give him the chance.

"Illuminating as always, Dr Parker. The birth of Kurdistan is one of the more remarkable historical processes we see taking place in the world today. We've seen northern Iraq stand on its own feet and we see Syrian Kurds begin to do the same. Momentum is building for a Greater Kurdistan – a region to include the Kurdish regions of Turkey and more importantly, Iran. A people's right to self-determination has been clearly put forth by thoughtful statesmen and by brave fighters as well. The Project is dedicated to guiding American policy in the direction of helping create this Greater Kurdistan. The state will have immense historical importance in our day and for years to come."

Desultory discussion ensued. No one asked Barrett anything.

Barrett knew any attempt by Turkish or Iranian Kurds to declare independence would fail. The Turks and Iranians could and would crush any uprising. He considered voicing this but upon looking around the room, he knew the seminar had been put together not to debate Greater Kurdistan but to build support for creating it.

Anthony was on the same page.

As the meeting broke up a buzz erupted. Barrett thought for a moment they were discussing his cautions and he prepared for a handful of people to ask questions and exchange cards. Then he looked to his phone and saw the news come across from several news sources. General Walton Ambrose Hillock had resigned from the army effective immediately.

The Israeli military attaché nodded briefly and congenially to Barrett and left the room. It wasn't the place to show outside ties. He watched the room empty. When a Kurdish man asked for his card, he smiled sheepishly and said that most people in New Mexico don't have business cards. "We just know each other."

Walter Ambrose Hillock

Walt Hillock was born in 1955 and grew up in Oak Park, Illinois, a short drive west from Chicago's Loop where the Daley machine still held sway – the elder Daley. The Hillocks' house was three blocks from Ernest Hemingway's boyhood home. His father, a young lieutenant colonel in a B-25 squadron during WW2, was city editor for the *Chicago Tribune*. His mother began a tutoring center on the city's Southside. They were increasingly distant by the time Walt was in high school.

He was an excellent student and placed in the 96th percentile on the ACTs and SATs. He lettered in football, basketball, and track, and was offered a football scholarship to Northwestern University. A straight-laced young man, Walt was not as popular as he would have been in the early sixties or before. Instead of accepting Northwestern's offer, he opted for West Point where he finished nineteenth in his class and senior year played wide receiver on the 6-5 team.

Upon graduation he went through infantry training at Benning and jump school at Bragg. He fought his way onto the fast track and earned advanced degrees from the War College and the Command and General Staff School. He picked up a PhD in government from Cornell University. In 1990, *Time* named him one of the nation's leaders of tomorrow.

As a boy, cadet, and young officer, Hillock looked on in frustration and ire at the social changes sweeping America after Vietnam and Watergate. America had lost its moral compass and sense of mission. He felt the United States Army was a redoubt of discipline, honor, and virtue in a country plagued by moral decay, self-absorption, and anomie. He'd read a little Durkheim while at Cornell.

Off base, he felt decay all around him and was relieved upon reentering the post, after a crisp salute from a white-gloved MP. America needed guidance to return to greatness and the United States Army was the on institution to give it. Maybe the only one. The army would perform that mission one day. He was sure of it.

His upbringing hadn't been especially religious. His father was vaguely Methodist, his mother similarly Unitarian. Her faith became social work in a church basement on Chicago's Southside.

As a junior and mid-level officer Hillock found religion to be part of the soldier's outlook, fusing theology and nationalism, adding depth to one's words, providing a basis for the solace conveyed to families of the fallen in letter form.

His mind dealt almost unconsciously with an internal conflict. His religiousness was more utilitarian than sincere; it helped his career. This presented the problem of hypocrisy. After years of struggle the attractiveness of sincerity overpowered the tawdriness of utility. Walton Hillock became as devout as his superior officers, as earnest in prayer as a seminarian, and as devoted to playing a part in America's mission in the world as a televangelist. Church attendance was regular, though a rising officer had to pull duty on more than a few Sundays. He was appointed deacon at the churches he attended in his various postings.

With all the moving about, from CONUS to Europe and Korea and the Middle East, his wife Elaine, an army brat, felt isolated from her family and subordinated to her husband's career and will – hardly a rarity in military marriages. She found community and purposefulness in a Dispensationalist church outside Ft Polk, Louisiana. Walt was soon attracted to it, initially for its usefulness in meeting senior officers in the congregation. Soon he was a member of the sect and proclaimed himself to be a follower of its national leader, Reverend Everett Willis Keller.

Hillock saw another mission for America, one not as dire and apocalyptic as the one Keller envisioned. He pondered the benefits of a new Cold War. It would provide a mission for the nation and return Americans to their moral grounding, before decadence took hold in the shameful post-Vietnam years. This new global contest, or Cold War Two as he liked to call it, would be a tonic for the economy, as had World War Two and Cold War One. Hillock prided himself with originating the line, "War is Keynesian economics by other means."

Enlisted soldiers only infrequently come into contact with senior officers. Such contact, thankfully, only takes place at special ceremonies and usually at considerable physical distance, though snap inspections and encounters at the PX and personnel offices do take place, usually to discomfort on both sides.

One buck sergeant had a few such encounters with senior officers while in the service and more than a few in professional life after leaving the army. He was convinced that the higher an officer rose, the more ignorant he was of the lives of enlisted personnel, the more removed he was from their lives, the more he lived and ate and thought in an

ethereal world of myth and sanctimony and cant. Where generals and politicians saw national security, honor, and sacrifice, he saw miscalculation, lies, and senseless deaths.

He once looked on from some distance as a general choppered in, camera crews in his train, to look at the carnage after the battle of Medina Ridge. Hearty smiles, thumbs up, bold assurances. He looked over to the still burning T-72 whose turret he'd put a sabot round through from a mile off, incinerating the crew. He stared blankly at a charred corpse, its arm raised skyward.

The Project backs its man

The evening news was all over Hillock's interview on the Del Lewis Show and ensuing resignation. Wall-to-wall coverage, as the expression goes. National and international events – the economy, Aleppo, and Kurdistan – became irrelevant. The general's bold words were repeated over and over. Most guest analysts were critical of Hillock. He had transgressed the lines between civil and military authority, just as Douglas MacArthur had in 1951 when he fell out with the White House during the Korean War.

An elderly analyst recalled that Edwin Walker ran afoul of President Kennedy and was put out to pasture. Oddly enough, Lee Harvey Oswald tried to kill Walker not long before he succeeded in assassinating Kennedy.

The story of Hillock's resignation eventually got stale and it didn't take long for the news to shift to speculating about a campaign bid by the general. He was set to retire the next day at a ceremony on Ft Bragg, North Carolina. The media were frustrated because the event was closed to the public. No one would know just what he said there.

Many of the analysts expressed skepticism that a general could resign and suddenly build an organization to win the White House. There was usually an interval of service on a corporate board or two, or a few years in Congress, or a slot at a think tank that gave him the opportunity to speak on events of the day. It was pointed out that Hillock had no experience dealing with congress and forming consensus. It was "my way or the stockade," as one analyst put it. Another lamented one more sign of the growing influence of the military in national life. They were negotiating with foreign leaders, guiding international policy, heading up corporations, and making their presence felt in congress.

Leela Kahmseh watched it all.

Feigning neutrality is part of the news anchor gig, but it was clear from somber intros and concerned looks into the camera that the anchors were not attracted to the idea of a Hillock presidency. Reporters patched together comments from people on the street.

“Not what the country needs right now.”

“Another polarizing figure.”

“Too controversial for me.”

Two days later, the first of the polling results came in. Hillock, whose name hadn't appeared in previous polls, was getting generous positive responses, mostly in the low thirties. The negatives were about the same, and about forty percent of Americans still hadn't heard of him.

Over the next week, Hillock was all over talk radio, especially the Del Lewis Show where he'd all but tossed his garrison cap into the ring – or thrown down the gauntlet, as Woolfolk was saying. It wasn't just the predictable radio shows. C-SPAN had Hillock on for a two-hour morning program, complete with telephone callers. A few were hostile, accusing him of being part of the “military-industrial complex” and tied to failed policies in the Middle East. About half, though, were grateful for his long service.

More than one asked if he was going to run. More than one implored him to run. Either way, Hillock spoke modestly of his dedication to serving his country in any way he could.

Leela and the Project's media consultant booked Hillock on late-night talk shows where he came across as amiable and thoughtful. He laughed gregariously when hosts joked about challenging Putin to a duel or riding a tank across the Mall to the White House “to send a message.” Leela thought he'd eased concern that he might be too aggressive for high office.

Hillock's numbers climbed steadily over the next week. His negatives remained where they were but the “undecideds” fell sharply and broke for the general. The news shows were doing on-the-street interviews and mention of Hillock led to many beaming faces and gushing voices of approval.

“He's the right man for the country.”

“No more hayseed governors and inexperienced senators.”

“He's above politics and knows what has to be done.”

“We need a strong leader for these times.”

“He’s so handsome!”

“He’s *kewl!*”

He’d become a sensation.

Hillock’s numbers were skyrocketing the week before the convention. Meetings had been underway behind closed doors. Borden Woolfolk and a few senior Project staffers had organized them.

Three candidates dropped out and more were expected to follow. All were expected to pledge their delegates to Hillock. Some read the polls and the tea leaves and did so willingly. Others had to have their arms twisted. Woolfolk was helpful there, not so much by personal charm, more by convincing donors to cut them off cold. They too pledged the delegates to the man of the hour, the man who promised to act decisively.

Hillock won the nomination in the first round and ascended the stage wearing his uniform with its many rows of ribbons. The crowd roared its approval, the media gushed at his miraculous rise in the last few weeks. His numbers rose another six points overnight.

Leela sat down across the table from Jack Severson, the host of ANN’s evening interview program.

“Leela Khamseh is with us tonight. She’s the skillful and if I may say, the eloquent head of the Project for a New American Democracy’s presidential campaign wing which is called. . . .”

“We call it the New American Leadership Program, Jack. And thanks for having me on tonight. It’s a wonderful and auspicious time in our country.”

“Yes, it is. Walton Hillock has his party’s nomination, but do you think Americans are ready to accept a general as their president?”

“Jack, when have the American people *not* accepted a general as their president? When in this country’s two-hundred-and twenty-seven years of existence have they not accepted a general as their president. When have they not been enthralled by a

man in uniform basking in the aura of martial virtue and shining victory. Shall I list them?"

Severson nodded amiably for her to go ahead.

"George Washington, William Henry Harrison, Andrew Jackson, Franklin Pierce, Zachary Taylor, Ulysses S Grant, Rutherford B Hayes, James Garfield, Chester A Arthur, Benjamin Harrison, and Dwight Eisenhower. I could name some colonels too. . ."

The well-practiced lines had worked well with Woolfolk and the Project's high council and they worked with Severson and the ANN audience. Severson was impressed, even dazzled.

"Some people are saying – and I'm just reporting what I hear out in the public – that a general isn't a good fit for America now. Too aggressive, some say. Too inexperienced in congressional dealing. What say you to that, Leela Khamseh?" Severson leaned forward and stared into Leela's dark eyes.

"I say someone inexperienced with congressional wheeling and dealing would be a great thing for the country. We need someone who can rise above partisan bickering that's dividing our nation and weakening it in the world. Those who say otherwise are the old military-haters who dredge up tired rallying cries from bygone eras. No. I say *no*. Walton Ambrose will make a fine president."

"Thanks, Leela. We'll talk again, I'm sure."

"I look forward to it, Jack."

Leela left the studio exhilarated but uneasy. The interview was an adrenalin rush. No doubt about that. She felt she'd connected with Severson and more importantly with the public. She looked around at the people ambling along M Street, and wondered how many of the people would see her when the program was repeated later in the evening and when she appeared on similar programs in coming weeks.

She'd entered a new world. A world of media, ego, and pitches. A world removed from the chatter of university faculties and think tanks. A world where lots of people listened to your words, even though they were calculated and superficial. Rationalizations and half-truths were the lingua franca. Ego reigned supreme. She was slipping into careerism, with Woolfolk in charge. Maybe Hillock too. At least she was beginning to realize it.

She thought of an old boyfriend from grad school in Chicago, and of his gruff candor and angry insistence that politicians got other peoples' children killed in faraway wars unrelated to America's national security. What did she know about Hillock except that he had a uniform, an aura of power prestige, and a steadily rising war chest? Was he good for the country? How would he govern? She shuddered and hailed a cab at the corner with 19th Street.

In coming days, the phrases in her pitch at the Project meeting, the ones she repeated to Jack Severson's viewers, echoed in the media and public, usually with a little embellishment. At least twice a day Del Lewis bellowed, "When have Americans *not* wanted a general to lead them?" He went on to give a tally of the number of umbrellas that had been sent to the White House.

The litany of former generals who'd become presidents was heard on talk shows, at office water coolers, and in bar rooms. The voices were often breathless in their support of the general, about whom they knew little but who they were convinced was the man of the hour.

"We need a strong hand at the helm now."

"He can put an end to partisan squabbling and lead the way."

Bumper stickers proudly announced the drivers' patriotism and choice of candidates.

"Support Your Local General!"

"Act Decisively!"

Leela saw at least three of each such bumper stickers on her way home a few evenings later. What did people know about the general? What did they care? He promised certainty and honor and victory. And each of those meant different things to different people. The general was a new love in whom dwelled everything they hoped for.

"Tippecanoe and Hillock too," she murmured as she turned from Virginia Avenue to the underground parking lot of the Envoy. "Woolfolk will print a million of them . . . and make a nickel a piece."

The call of war, II

Leela lay in bed mulling over polling data and the history of the American presidency. The public had an undeniable attraction to military figures. She didn't fully understand it, just enough for the presentation at the Project's executive meeting and on television. Polling data only touched on the subject. That sufficed for Woolfolk and the public.

A guy thing? No, the surveys showed that American women admired military leaders almost as much men did. The limited data at hand from foreign countries showed the same thing. In more traditional societies, women admired military leaders slightly more than men did. Hadn't all heroes defeated a dread foe or slain some fearsome beast, all in the cause of protecting women and children? The appeal, she suspected, was in our psyches, perhaps in our DNA.

She grew up hearing ancient Persian legends of heroes past and knew that Iranian schoolgirls fawned over soldiers. It wasn't just the girls around army posts she grew up on. It held throughout Iran. Tribal areas where the army was not well liked, and even feared, had their own myths of rebel chieftains and clever bandits who fought for the sake of their peoples' honor. There were tales of empires won in heroic battle and lost in treachery, then restored by another heroic figure. What boy or girl didn't attach those myths to their fathers and brothers, especially if they had a photograph of them in uniform, young and brave and noble? Had they perished in battle, they became martyrs.

In ancient Persian cosmology, the world was a battlefield on which the armies of goodness fought the armies of darkness. That view shaped everyone's understanding of their people's wars with Medeans, Babylonians, Macedonians, or Arabs. The Russians, British, and Americans were latecomers in the rematches between good and evil. Every nation has a similar template. If it didn't, its myths were shallow and devoid of romance.

Leela's religious upbringing, limited though it was, required her to read of the end of days, when cities were burned to the ground and the faithless were put to the sword. It

sounded more like a murderous war than divine will, but over the centuries the two became confused. Christianity, she knew from reading medieval history in college, had become a devout warrior religion after Arab armies swept into France in the eighth century. The Church fused its once placid and other-worldly faith with the ambitious and bloodstained nobility of the sword. Their actions became saintly deeds, their enemies minions of hell. The epics flowed for centuries, seeped into millions of men and women, and coursed through their veins.

The fusion of romantic myths and murderous hearts has long made for powerful warrior creeds. The fusion seemed to have faded away in Europe with the slaughter at the Somme and Verdun in the Great War, more so after its even more violent reprise. It was alive on more than one continent and it was beginning to flame more brightly in more than one faith.

Comparing warrior leaders of the past with most political leaders of today was pointless. In the vast chasm of the pointlessness came an instructive echo, frail and rarely listened to yet instructive – and not only for advancing the agenda of the Project and the like. Few politicians or business leaders had any magical aura around them. Yes, it could be created by consultants, but innate charisma was beyond them.

A quote from an old Russian thinker came to her. “You cannot replace the dogma of patriotism, the tradition of courage, and the shrine of honor by the rules of political economy.”

Politicians or business leaders had that an heroic aura after the Second World War, and well before that, after Lee handed his sword to Grant at Appomattox. They’d braved fire, led men, aided the wounded, and defeated the foe. Leela knew there was a lot of mayhem and lies lurking in those myths, but the aura of war was an historical fact and a political reality.

Prosperity and materialism dim the aura and allow imitations and frauds to flood the marketplace. People lose their senses of wonder and romance and heroism. They’re absorbed by incomes, mortgages, and buying stuff, until one day they, or more likely their children, yearn for more fulfilling experiences. After decades of the logical and the rational, Americans are now yearning for the lost sense of wonder and romance and heroism.

The more she looked at General Hillock, the less heroic he appeared. He seemed like any other accomplished man of his age – a business leader, television executive. Not silicon valley, not ESPN; more conventional than that. His neatly trimmed hair, crisply ironed uniform, the practiced gestures and speeches all reminded her of the shah’s coterie in Tehran, not the troops in the garrisons with her father along the

borders. Hillock was the man of the hour, though, and she'd helped set the clock and stage.

She slept fitfully. Her mind was jabbed by images of chariots racing out to the enemy and firing flaming arrows from sturdy bows before falling back to reload, then returning over and over again. Cities burst into flames, pillars crashed to the ground, and arrogant men looked on with great satisfaction as people wept and cheered. She couldn't recognize any of their faces but upon waking she felt sure she knew one of them. And she wondered if she was becoming one of them.

She thought again of a man from grad school who'd been in the Iraq War – the first one. She asked him if he was patriotic and he replied that he wasn't especially so. She asked if he was attracted to war and he said perhaps a little when he first entered the army. He went on to say that when right out of high school he thought military service would be "interesting." Not wondrous or glorious or fulfilling, just interesting. She didn't understand him.

He was a curmudgeon who sat out along the Lake Michigan shoreline and stared at the horizon every day for hours. She found him, well, interesting, and she thought of him from time to time and read his columns about the wars in Iraq and Syria and Afghanistan. He was the only veteran she knew, besides her father.

The Good Fork

Barrett called Peter to tell him he'd be staying in DC a few more days.

"You gettin' a fat consultin' job up there? That it?"

"No, Peter. This isn't my kinda town at all. I prefer looking at the Sandias than the hills across the Potomac."

"A girlfriend then?"

"Nope. Not me. Speaking of lone wolves, how's our friend Jesse?"

"He's napping outside near the truck. I'm giving him his glucosamine and chondroitin. Don't worry 'bout that. He's walkin' pretty darn well. Better'n me, anyway. Haven't heard a coyote in half a mile since you dropped him off. They smell him and they stay the hell away."

"Wise critters. You don't fear him, though."

"No, no. He's a fine ol' gentleman. You know that. Barry, you need to be careful up there in that town. They got wolves there too."

Barrett agreed and said he'd be back in a few days.

Anthony and Barrett lunched the next day at The Good Fork – a Vietnamese restaurant near 19th and K, seating no more than forty, more crowded than Barrett preferred. Its walls had scenes of life in the villages and on the Mekong River and the menus told of a floating restaurant by the same name on the Saigon River. Anthony had been at the DC place a few times before and was greeted by Phuong, the graying but ever jovial owner.

“Greetings, Anthony! And greetings to your friend too. I see he’s a veteran too.”
Phuong turned to Barrett. “Welcome, young warrior men, welcome. I was captain in South Vietnamese airborne division. Too many operations. *Everyday*, we do operations. Too many, too many. Sit down in booth, young warrior men. Sit down, please.”

“So you were a *dai uy* then.” Barrett used one of the handful of Vietnamese terms he knew.

“Yes, I was captain. How do you know *dai uy*?”

“My uncle was a captain with an advisory team in Ban Me Thuot. The Montagnards called him *dai uy*.”

“Then they must have loved him and knew him as brave man. I am sure of that. Enjoy your meal!”

Barrett and Anthony briefly mentioned their war experiences. The former, a buck sergeant with an armor unit in Gulf War One. The latter, an OCS captain with the Kurds in Gulf War Two and with a sniper unit in Afghanistan. Just their units and their years. The rest was stuff for inquisitive teenagers and boastful barflies. Sometimes for intrigued women.

“So, Anthony, maybe I should call you *dai uy*!”

“Fine by me.”

They looked over the menu and a few moments later a young Asian waitress speaking unaccented English approached with a pot of tea. She’d probably never been to Vietnam or had any interest in going there. They ordered *bo dun* and lemongrass chicken. In an effort to be more inclusive of other Southeast Asian countries, they ordered satay as an appetizer.

“You think those wars achieved anything, Anthony? Wars aren’t supposed to be shows of our ability to transport an army across the world and defeat another country.”

“They’re supposed to increase our national security or achieve some high ideal. The ’91 war? Stabilized the Gulf and let the oil move through Hormuz. Maybe our security was helped. Not sure what the ’03 war did for us.”

Barrett held his thunder in the presence of someone whose views were unknown to him. He’d learned to hold back, especially in Washington. In New Mexico, plain

speaking was more accepted if not mandatory, though even there he'd gone too far, at Kelly's and elsewhere, and offended more than a few people.

"Didn't do a goddam thing for us, Barrett. Not a goddam thing."

Barrett nodded, encouraging Anthony to continue.

"All it led to was the Shia and Sunnis going at each other. The low estimates are 100,000 dead . . . and 4,500 GIs."

"Maybe the architects of the war, in government and think tanks, wanted the region to break into pieces. That makes more sense than the WMD and democracy nonsense they peddled to the public. I dunno . . . I can't even say for sure why we went into Phuong's country. We know who supported the war; we don't know their complete, honest reasoning."

"Complete, honest reasoning. . . . Strange words in this town. Evasion and deviousness are more appreciated. Wars do one thing well."

Barrett cocked an eyebrow.

"They bring us refugees who open fine eating establishments like The Good Fork. Maybe we'll be eating at an Iraqi restaurant near here soon."

"I know a great Afghan place in Bethesda. It's on Cordell Avenue near Old Georgetown."

"I'm still trying to figure the Project out. Every think tank has donors who want to see certain things take place that they can claim as partly their own doing. They themselves are too off-putting or inarticulate or dumb. Or their pasts are, shall we say, problematic. Whatever the problem is, they stick to writing the checks. You've been there for almost a year now. What's so important about Kurdistan to these writers of big checks?"

"A lot of people want the Kurds to be the baddest mofos in the valley, and to be *our* mofos in the valley. They fight. They're mostly Sunnis but show no interest in hating Shias, and they're not given to religious extremism. They've been victims of it more than once in their long history."

"And they don't like Iran or Saudi Arabia too much. Yes, the Kurds have oil but not in immense quantities."

“Oil helps, Barrett. They’re not on the dole. They pay for their weapons with petrodollars. The Project wants them to sell more of their oil to get more arms and become more powerful.”

“Do they buy arms from us?”

“Some, but they’re more accustomed to Russian and Chinese stuff. They buy US jets and Stingers though. I think the Project has bigger things in mind. They want to detach the Kurdish areas from Iran and attach them to our bad mofos in the valley.”

“That will make our mofos more numerous and maybe more mofo-ish. How are the Kurds faring in moving away from guerrilla bands to a regular army?”

“Oh . . . that’s *hard*. Very hard. The Kurds have many tribes and many factions. When you try to put them into a unitary organizational system . . . it’s trouble, it’s corrupt.”

The meals arrived and the two spooned out servings of rice and both entrees onto their plates, far less delicately than Project decorum would have it, more like a mess line overseas.

“It won’t stop there, Anthony.”

“No, *đai uy*, it won’t. It never does. Well, here’s to our old friends we ate MREs with, wherever they are this day. Cheers.”

“You using Project funds for this meal?”

“Yup.” Anthony flashed his company American Express card. “Their pockets are pretty damn deep now that Hillock is picking up steam.”

“Have I ever told you how much I like the Project for a New American Democracy?”

“Your appreciation is palpable, my friend.”

On the way back to the Project, as they walked down New Hampshire Avenue and paused at a crosswalk, Barrett was caught off guard by a question.

“Did you ever listen in on the radio traffic in Iraqi armor units?”

Barrett thought back to the days after they crossed from Saudi Arabia into Iraq and to the sharp engagement at Medina Ridge.

“Yes, I did. Don’t know Arabic though. Not even their word for captain.”

“It’s *qaa’ed*, as I recall. But you’ve heard that metallic click, followed by eerie silence.”

Barrett thought of the click he heard on Iraqi net when a tank was hit. He winced. His steps hesitated but never quite halted. “That was the memorable sound of the radio gear melting from a direct hit to the turret. Molten metal and fire shoot throughout the crew compartment.”

“Yeah. . . . You don’t forget that sound – try as you might. It stays with you. Some guys cheered when they heard it over the radio, some didn’t. . . . Do you miss those days, Barrett? Do you ever want to get back to where there’s fighting? I don’t. Not anymore.”

Barrett exhaled audibly. “I asked that same thing of a neighbor in New Mexico. World War Two. He has a flag he took off an SS panzer that he knocked out near Aachen, just inside the Siegfried Line.” Anthony shook his head in astonishment. “He said he didn’t miss war at all. He just missed doing something as important as he was doing back then – and witnessing incredible things, enduring them. Assimilating them, overcoming them.”

Anthony looked at him and felt the words resonate within him. They were an unspoken, unarticulated truth. He thought that the continuous confrontation with astonishing, unforgettable, and unassimilable events was part of what kept his friends in the military long after he’d had his fill of them and ETS’ed. They were often horrible, as when detached or previously internal parts of the human body are forcefully displayed before you.

Others were wondrous, though, as when a friend sprinted through heavy fire and came crashing down behind a protective wall and erupted into laughter that spread to all around him. No one else would understand such things and few would try to explain them to outsiders. That’s what kept people in. Not the pay. Not the ribbons. Not the vacant praise from those who’d remained a-bed. It was learning to endure and understanding the confrontation. Taking it.

There was also the idea that they were defending their country, protecting the American people. Anthony once believed it. He believed in his wars with the ardor of a knight amid prayerful vigil. But not after three tours overseas and the prospect of more. Not after hearing that metallic click every night in his sleep, month after month.

School reunion

Barrett was authorized to walk around most of the Project's office area. Some areas, including Woolfolk's inner sanctum, were off limits. That was fine with Barrett; he had no interest in stopping by Woolfolk's office for a friendly chat. The director had emailed him in the last hour suggesting they meet, along with mention of a temporary ID waiting for him at the front desk. Dun and Bradstreet let too damn much information out. The conversation would begin with Woolfolk thanking him for his service. A minute or two later, the pitch would start.

Barrett picked up the ID and left a check in an envelope for Woolfolk. It wasn't a large amount, well under six figures, just enough to let him walk around the Project and get a feel for the place.

The names on the doors in the hallways were familiar. He recognized a few from their writings and TV appearances, usually on programs more prominent than the ones that tolerated his scruffy looks. He wanted to know more about the staff. He noticed neoclassical themes in the drawings and objets d'art – Pericles speaking to the people of Athens, Plato and Augustus, and southern mansions in the Greek Revival tradition. A curio case held a sixteenth-century printing of *The Republic*.

He wondered if by telling Woolfolk what a fine philosopher-king he'd be, Barrett could wheedle another free meal at The Good Fork. Then again, maybe his check was enough to get his own American Express Card.

Relaxing in Anthony's office while he was at an embassy, Barrett leafed through the Project directory. He recognized seven or eight names and knew their pedigree from Harvard's Olin Center, the Naval War College, and Yale Law. It all fit. More interested in the foreign policy wing, he came only later to the leadership program and then saw a familiar name – a Middle Eastern name, an Iranian name, a woman's name.

He found women in grad school uninteresting, their personal relationships so infused with political beliefs that little spontaneity and self-awareness remained. That was no

basis for a romantic whirl, only a dull debate in one room or another. Sherry hour discussions, chance library meetings, chats after classes led nowhere, and Barrett was branded aloof and haughty or, owing to his military background, coarse and reactionary. Not so, he just preferred the women he met at the gym, often enough women on the basketball or volleyball team.

There were exceptions.

They'd never been in a class together. He was three years ahead of her, in school at least. Barrett ditched the sherry hours, and since getting an office on the second floor of Pick Hall, he rarely went to the library except to check out and return books. Their eyes first met in the student lounge where messages were left in folders in the days when email was just beginning. She instantly noted his attraction, smiled briefly, and almost dismissively headed down the corridor, in his estimation to disabuse him of any idea that she was attracted to him. He listened to her heels echoing from the stone walls of the empty corridor.

He got her name from a second-year grad student who cautioned him that she was more aloof than he. Then at the Coop Bookstore, on a Friday when they set out the new arrivals on what people called the "sacred table," she was there, leafing through new selections on American politics. Another smile and she scurried up the stairs to University Avenue.

In his office, reading Galula's notes from Algeria, Barrett listened to the high heels echoing delicately, and strangely erotically, down the hallway. The late afternoon sun reflected off the gothic crenellation of the cathedral named after the university's patron saint, John D Rockefeller, and lit up his bookcase. He looked up and she was posing in the doorway. Her ample hips set to one side, a hand resting high on the jamb. The gold light was no match for her long raven hair. After a wondrous moment of awe, he became certain she'd seen the pose in a movie and practiced it many times, until satisfied.

"I have what you might call a pet hypothesis," she said, walking slowly to the chair near his desk, sitting down gracefully, and casually resting one leg over the other. The bounty of her hips was matched elsewhere, north and south.

"And what might that be?"

"I think that in foreign affairs, you're very much a realist."

"A fascinating hypothesis. One that should be explored, Miss. . . ."

"Khamseh. Leela Khamseh. But please call me by my given name."

“An opening with Iran may be upon us.”

“There’s always hope.”

A drink at Jimmy’s, Pad Thai at the Tipsuda, then back to his place in Madison Park. It was the start of something exhilarating, joyous, and brief. People graduate, or don’t, then move on. Some move on more unexpectedly than others, though. Post-doctoral appointments can bring sudden departures. That was part of the deal in grad school. Attempts to forge a different deal led to long-distance romances and ultimately to breakup, with a dalliance or two in the transition. A younger grad student usually figured in the transition.

Barrett walked down the tenth floor of the Project and stood in the doorway. He cleared his throat in as artificial manner as possible. She looked up, recognition barely beginning.

“I have a pet hypothesis, Ms Khamseh.”

Leela looked up from some ad copy and polling data and struggled to remain in professional mode. There was no urge to rush into his arms or take off her glasses and let her hair tumble to her shoulders, assisted by gentle shaking of her head, eyes closed, lips parted. No pencil placed to her lips either. In that respect, Barrett was somewhat disappointed, though his imagination was working fine. Her instinct was to let out a highly feminine giggle. Perfect for some locations, not an office on the tenth floor of the Project.

“I’d *love* to hear it, Mr Parker. Do come in . . . and *please* be so good as to close the door behind you.”

“Thank you,” he whispered as the door softly closed. “I hope I’m not disturbing you too much.”

Stifled laughter and moments of rustling followed. Leela turned up the volume on her computer speakers. The Del Lewis Show was on, so she quickly changed to a Persian music feed.

Barrett wasn't his usual grumpy self when he woke up at Leela’s place the next morning. It was in The Envoy, a mid-rise on Virginia Avenue overlooking the Potomac

near Georgetown. He recalled Leela kissing him as he slept just before she headed out, saying she had an important meeting and didn't want anyone to make her late.

As she stood in the doorway, he groggily said, "Don't forget to leave my money on the dresser."

She threw a sock at him as she headed for the front door. "I don't have any ones!"

Barrett bolted upright.

After going back to dreamland for an hour, he got up and made a cup of coffee in a French press and stepped into the living room where a portrait of her father in full military regalia enjoyed a prominent place. The uniform struck him as conceited and suggestive of a looming tragedy for Iran. Hassan Khamseh was the equivalent of a two-star general and charged with a missile program that was being developed with Israeli help. They were allies then. He fled shortly after Khomeini came to power in '79. He brought his wife and child with him and Chevy Chase replaced northern Tehran.

He walked onto the balcony and was hit by the din of the Whitehurst Freeway below. Nonetheless, there was a remarkable view of the Kennedy Center, the Watergate, and the Potomac. To the left were Memorial Bridge and the Lincoln and Jefferson Memorials. To the right, Key Bridge and Georgetown University, where he'd gone to college on the GI Bill.

His antediluvian cell phone rang. No song played; it sounded like an old dial phone.

"I hope you're up. There's a scone or two in the fridge, but try to hold off."

"Lunch?"

"Yes. Let's do Vietnamese. Ever heard of The Good Fork?"

"I -"

"Look it up and meet me there at one pm. Gotta run!"

He heard the call end and for personal amusement added, "I love new restaurants . . . *Bo dun?* Sounds intriguing . . . What does *dai uy* mean?"

Blue Line, Red Line. Barrett rode silently with tourists and flex-time workers who were absorbed by their phones. He was still trying to put together the Project and where Leela fit in. She wasn't a good fit for the academy. Her scholarship was secondary to other matters that faculties had to consider. She was too sensual. The women would hate her and they were 40% of the votes for hires and tenures. The men would find her attractive but out of their league. Their wives would be alarmed or angry.

He hopped off at Farragut North and walked over to the restaurant. It was just after one pm. Phuong recognized him and Barrett put a finger to his lips. "Afternoon, *dai uy*. I'm meeting someone." Washington restauranteurs knew when to keep silent. Senators and constituents, assistant cabinet secretaries and secretaries. On and on in that town.

Leela waved and smiled sweetly from a secluded booth near the kitchen doors.

"You'll never guess who Woolfolk and I had a teleconference with this morning." She spoke calmly, not giddily, though she was eager to surprise him.

"How many guesses do I have?"

She held up her digit finger above the water glass she was sipping from.

Not eager to speak the name in a public place, albeit in a secluded booth, he mouthed, "General Walton Hillock."

Her disappointment at not stumping him was discernible. She briefly held up a different finger.

A server placed the *bo dun* and lemongrass chicken before them.

"I took the liberty of ordering already. Saves time."

"I'm surprised. Keep that finger down. It's unbecoming for a rising Washington insider."

"That expression is not without unpleasant connotations. I should mete out rough justice."

"Let's eat first."

Leela spoke in high spirits of the teleconference. Hillock was on the same page as the Project in most areas and on the critical ones, he was in accord. That concerned Barrett, but he was practiced in keeping his thoughts to himself.”

“Hillock favors a greater role for America in the world, especially in the Middle East. He favors efforts to protect the American family, which resonates with the Moral Regeneration wing at the Project. And he supports a creative way of handling the national debt that Woolfolk and some investment bankers have thought up.”

“Which is what?”

“That’s under wraps for now.”

“Do I get a guess?”

“Of course you can guess. Please do. You can guess what finger I’m thinking of.”

“The Project is going to hold bake sales and collect pop bottles.”

“Not quite. We’re backing him and getting our big donors behind him too. And no one says ‘pop’ outside of Chicago.”

“And the big donors are . . . let me guess. None of my business.”

“The backers are none of *my* business. Nonetheless, I see papers on Woolfolk’s desk, an occasional email gets inadvertently cc’ed to me, and I hear a few names here and there. They’re mostly in the investment world. Lots of bond dealers. Quite a few retired military people and religious leaders. Not as many business leaders as we’d expected though. The names must be somewhere in the building.”

“Maybe we can break in. Your place does look out on the Watergate.”

“I’ll call G Gordon Liddy.”

“Maybe you should call Oliver North instead.” He saw a quizzical look. “Leela, what do you think the Project and Hillock have in mind for your homeland?”

“We’re on the same page there too, Barrett. We’re working with the Iranian Democracy Initiative to help the reformers take power from the mullahs. After thirty-seven years of those dour, sanctimonious graybeards, everyone wants them out.”

Barrett thought of the devout rural dwellers of Iran that Americans never considered. They only knew of middle-class urban dwellers. “How do generals usually envision political change coming about?”

She rolled her eyes. “All you jaded veterans hate generals. Admit it. I thought it was just a Vietnam-era thing but apparently not.”

“Not true. I like Omar Bradley and Dwight Eisenhower. I probably would have liked your father too.”

“Well, that’s wonderful to hear, *sarge*. They’re not running this year though. You probably want a former enlisted soldier to be head of state.”

“I’ve given that some thought. However much my enlisted service shaped my character, outlook, disdain for elites, and penchant for exotic women, I freely confess to you here that our record in high politics has been less than impressive.”

“I can’t think of any just now.”

“Fulgencio Batista, Big Daddy Amin, that German guy back in the thirties and forties.”

“Austrian, not German, but I see your point. There must be some who were less reprehensible. Give me a moment or two . . . or three.” Leela took in a couple samplings of the lemon grass chicken. A third was on the way. “Aha! James Buchanan was an enlisted soldier in the War of 1812 and took part in the Battle of Bladensburg.”

“Sounds like a fine man. Is he running?”

“We lost to the British at Bladensburg and they burned Washington. Those things don't play well with our focus groups.”

“With the Project’s backing and good consultants, who knows. Buchanan could carry a couple dozen states on a ‘Burn Washington Again’ platform.”

“There’s polling data to support that, Barrett. You should read more polling data. Good stuff. Anyway, I’m off on a trip tomorrow with Woolfolk, and if I may presage what’s going through your jaded head, yes, you may stay at my place. But no *other* exotic women.”

“Where’re you off to? A Mujahideen-i-Khalq compound in Iraq? A bunker-busting bomb test in Nevada? A Victoria’s Secret factory outlet?”

“I only give one guess, remember? Anyway, all three are wrong, though the last one has attractions and I’ll be watchful for one.” She enjoyed seeing Barrett’s eyes ignite and she bobbed her eyebrows. “The correct answer is we’re off to meet with Reverend Everett Willis Keller.”

“*Jesus!*”

“Just Keller.”

Barrett leaned back. “I’m envisioning a steer on a spit above a blazing mesquite fire as Hank Williams music plays. Hank Williams, *Jr.* Can I tag along?”

Leela tossed her napkin to the table, annoyed incredulity flaring in her eyes. “*Hell . . . fucking . . . no!*”

A few people looked over from their tables. Leela and Barrett smiled sheepishly.

“You’re talking like a sergeant, not the daughter of a general. A simple ‘hell no’ would have sufficed. Is the Project paying for this meal?” Leela’s rolled eyes and the motion for her purse answered his question. “I love the Project – whoever their donors are. I say that more often than you know.”

A look on her face suggested he was missing something, and soon enough it came to him. One of the big donors must be Reverend Everett Willis Keller. And then of course there were his legions of followers.

“Crimson, Leela.”

“Crimson what?”

“In case you come across a Victoria’s Secret outlet in the Panhandle. Crimson.”

She leaned forward until they were only inches away. “Black, Barrett. Silky, black with *seams* in the back.”

“Seams in the back . . . how could I have forgotten. Can you forgive me?”

“Yesssss.”

Their lips touched for a brief, wonderful moment.

The check arrived.

Muleshoe, Texas

The flight from Reagan-National to Dallas was direct, swift, and uneventful. Woolfolk and Leela then took a turbo-prop commuter plane for a bumpy, wobbly hop over to Preston Smith Airport north of Lubbock, home to Keller's Cathedral of Hope. A rented Mercedes C Class took them out the flat grasslands and occasional ponds that lay along Rt 84 as they headed northwest to Keller's compound a couple hours away. Woolfolk was at the wheel.

He flipped around the dial and found four or five stations airing Del Lewis. He was talking about baseball being the ideal American game, so Woolfolk kept searching up and down the dial. Country stations, one after the other. Woolfolk made a note to get a car with satellite radio next time.

"Keller is a descendant of Germans who settled in Mexico, oh, a hundred fifty years ago. Ranchers. Big landowners. There was a peasant revolution or something down there and the Kellers headed north of the ol' Rio Grand-ay. Same with a lot of the German ranchers. Ever hear any Tex-Mex music, Leela?"

A distant memory came to her of seeing a Tex-Mex group at the Wise Fools Pub in Chicago. The Tigers of the North, they were called. "Oh, yes I have. Mexican music with a lot of horns and an accordion or organ."

"That's it. The horns are the influence of those German ranchers. Solid people. Big donors."

Leela nodded silently. Woolfolk, she knew, liked to collect bits of information. He knew nothing about Mexican history or music. Historical knowledge was useless to him and his ambitions. The odds and ends and trivia gave him the appearance of depth and expansiveness, but they were simply minute items he used to impress people, like his Mont Blanc pen and the autographed picture of him and Drew Brees hanging on his wall, near the one of him in his naval uniform.

“Muleshoe,” Leela murmured. “Muleshoe, Texas.” The featureless plains reminded her of a movie she and Barrett had seen at his place in Chicago. High school kids in the early fifties. The car sped past an old motel and she thought of Jeff Bridges and Cybil Shepherd. The title leapt out to her. *The Last Picture Show*.

Semi after semi. Ranch after ranch. She searched for a sign saying “Gas, food, Victoria’s Secret.” Her disappointment grew keener with every mile marker.

Leela knew Barrett lived 150 miles west of there and wondered if the East Mountains of New Mexico looked anything like Muleshoe. What a puzzle that guy was. So educated and intermittently urbane, yet so distant to people and alienated in cities. What’s wrong with big cities, she once asked him. “There are too many people in them.” A good zip code for him was one with a cattle-to-human ratio of 100:1.

They turned off 84 and continued north on a two-lane blacktop until they came to a sign that said, “The Day Is Coming – Soon.” Woolfolk flipped up the turn signal and veered into a long driveway with small herds of reddish brown cattle on either side.

There, before a stately twenty-room mansion with neoclassical columns and widow’s walk, stood the Reverend Everett Willis Keller, an aide by his side. The famed televangelist in his mid-forties was shorter than he appeared on television. His face was round and cherubic and strikingly uncolored by the Texas sun. The plaid shirt with bolo tie and corduroy western jacket gave the idea of a prosperous man at home on a working ranch, where he would only rarely get his hands dirty without a camera around.

Leela and Woolfolk were greeted warmly and shown inside to a wood-paneled study adorned with religious paraphernalia and photographs of prized livestock. She thought it odd that there were far more heifers than cows and bulls. Her ancestors bred goats and cattle in the tribal region of southwestern Iran and the photos they’d spirited out of the country in ‘79 were of prized breeding stock, not their young.

Woolfolk complemented their host on his abundant blessings then got to business. Supremely confident in his element, Keller sat in a high-back leather chair and listened intently, hands folded atop his paunch, his expression that of a patient counselor speaking to a lost soul.

“Reverend Keller, we live in troubled times.”

Keller nodded and frowned. “True, all too true, my son. Troubled, yes. But filled with promise,” Keller spoke in a West Texas lilt. His sibilants came out almost comedically as near whistles.

Woolfolk nodded as though greatly wisdom had been imparted before continuing. “The land we love – the land God has chosen to lead the world – is in danger.”

Woolfolk adopted the look of a supplicant who sought forgiveness. Leela ordered her eyes not to roll.

“Our way of life is in danger, from forces within and without. Crime, poverty, unemployment . . . sinfulness and moral weakness . . . our enemies mock us and expect us soon to fall.”

“Indeed, they do, Mr Woolfolk. Scripture foretold these sorrowful events. Let us not forget that. And, Mr Woolfolk, let us not despair.”

“Of course not, Reverend. We believe that these grave times are a test. And we must respond to this test with . . . with faith of course, but also with bold action – *decisive* action. Action that demonstrates our righteousness and willingness to serve. Actions that will restore America’s might and decency.”

“Such actions call for a great leader. Mr Woolfolk . . . and Ms Khamseh, you’ll forgive me if I step in and say that I saw no such leader on the horizon. Not until recently, with the entrance of General Hillock into the campaign.”

“Yes, our organization and yours are in agreement then.” Woolfolk leaned forward, as though great wisdom were being imparted to him. Leela, taking the cue, nodded. Her eyes obeyed the no-roll order, so far.

“All righteous men are in agreement on this. God sends us challenges, often perplexing and dispiriting ones, but he also sends us those who can deliver us. Read your Exodus. Read your Kings, Samuel, Joshua, David . . . great kings, great warriors. They are parts of the unfolding of God’s plan. Where most men err, my friends, is in thinking that we are no longer involved in God’s plan. That is pride. That is rebellion. That is the great sin of our times.” Keller bowed his head sorrowfully.

Woolfolk sat back in his chair, sensing a speech was coming and knowing that it would be impolitic to do anything but assume a beatific expression and listen, no matter how longwinded and insipid the talk might be. Leela looked around at the photographs and out the bay window to an unexpectedly tidy barn tended by equally tidy workmen. They were not ranch hands, more like technicians.

“God’s plan is unfolding before us and we must search our very souls to learn our place in it. It is there within us, my friends. Only then can we know our true selves and our

nation's destiny. Only then can we know the role of America in the great events soon to transpire in the world, from a humble town in Texas, to the hills that grace the holy city of Jerusalem. I've been there, my friends. I've walked where He walked. And I shall walk there again. And what is more, my friends, I shall pray there again. I shall pray on the very site where Solomon prayed and where our Savior prayed and where the Romans and Mohammedans so impudently transgressed. I shall walk there again and pray there again!"

Woolfolk was equally put off by the verbose sermonette and took advantage of Keller's pause. He leaned forward, hands clasped together on a knee.

"Reverend Keller, your words humble me, yet they inspire me as well. They inspire me to endeavor all the more diligently and tirelessly for General Hillock. My organization, however, is but a small band compared to the hosts you so ably lead. We must work together for the goals we both see within reach." His hand reached out and slowly made a fist. Leela reminded her eyes of the standing order. "We must see that General Hillock does not want for diligent workers to spread the good news, to go to each and every home in this land and seek their help in bringing him to Washington."

Keller nodded and leaned forward, his hands clenched as though labor and struggle beckoned. His hands began to tremble.

Woolfolk was elated. The meeting was unfolding according to plan. Better really.

"And of course, Reverend Keller, we must endeavor to see that General Hillock's campaign does not want for the necessary means to perform the great work that has been placed upon his shoulders."

"Yes, yes. The material and spiritual realms must work together on this. My followers are being asked to keep General Hillock in their prayers and to help as their means allow."

Leela felt if she didn't speak, she'd yawn. "Then you've already asked your followers to contribute?"

"My word, young lady, yes. We discussed this last week when he was here in this very study." Keller sensed his guests were unsure of who he was speaking of. He enjoyed protracting the tension. "Yes, right where you two are sitting now, General Hillock was sitting only last week. A wonderful man. He has been sent us this day."

Keller turned a framed photograph on his desk to his guests. Keller stood alongside Hillock. The reverend in Sunday preaching garb, the general in dress uniform. Both men held palm leaves. There were no forced smiles as with most photo ops. They

looked determined and humble. Leela thought the reverend's expression was genuine, the general's contrived. And she didn't think the photo was taken anywhere near Muleshoe.

"I must excuse myself now, my friends. There's the matter of some husbandry I must attend to. This, after all, is a working farm, not simply a retreat for a simple country preacher. My aides can get together with you on the details of the funding and workers. What is it you call the people who go door to door?"

"The ground campaign," Leela replied. "As opposed to the media effort which is the air campaign."

"Yes, yes. And I shall work on an air campaign too. We now have our station on most cable systems. Next time you'll have to stay a day or two. We'll put on a barbecue for you that could be seen from the heavens!"

Leela tried to think of a Hank Williams, Jr song but drew a blank.

On the way back to Lubbock and the plane home, Woolfolk was in high spirits. He hummed along with the predictable melodies on the country music stations and his hands tried to keep time by patting the steering wheel of the Mercedes. Leela noted an absence of vocal and percussion talents.

Twenty miles down Rt 84, without a Victoria's Secret in sight, Leela spoke up. "*Mohammedans*? What was all that about his plan and Solomon and impudent Romans and Mohammedans? That's a rather archaic usage. Was that a shot at me?"

Woolfolk chortled – rather artificially. "No, I don't think so. He probably thought you were Mexican. Leela, as for that plan and Solomon – you wouldn't believe me if I told you and swore to it on a stack of Bibles signed by Keller his *damn* self. We got that dimwit on board. Him and his equally dimwitted yet generous followers. That's all that counts. We did damn good today, Leela. Things are looking good!"

He turned up the radio, stepped on the gas pedal, and let out a mocking "Yee-hah!"

The Mercedes raced past a startled armadillo. The puzzled creature watched the car recede in the distance before scooting across the two-lane blacktop that stretched endlessly across the Texas Panhandle.

New Mexico

Leela read her messages as she deplaned at Reagan-National. Barrett wanted to meet at the airport Starbucks, in twenty minutes. “I’ll pay this time,” he ended. No smiley face with an open parenthesis and colon was needed. Nor was a hint needed as to why he was at the airport. He was blowing town and cutting things off, again.

“I’ll see you in the morning, Mr Woolfolk. I’m meeting a friend here.”

“If you’re tired, take the morning off. The meeting will be dry and technical, unlike today’s little excursion into hillbilly heaven. Still, as a rising star at the Project, you should see it in all its glorious facets. With any luck I’ll have a plum appointment in the next administration and the Project will be looking for a new honcho.”

He winked and headed for the line of cabs outside.

Woolfolk was eager to see her ascend the ranks, and his occasional glances told her why, at least in part. She was always prepared and personable. Her presentation on military leadership had been a hit with the big shots and her stock was on the rise. She saw a future with the Project. She wasn’t sure how much of her loyalty was based on believing in the Project and how much was based on rescuing her from a sterile life with academics until her modest trust fund kicked in.

Barrett was seated in a booth, reading *The Wall Street Journal*. She sat down before he looked up.

“Still playing the market? I thought you quit that and confined your energies to foreign policy.”

He motioned to the barista and she brought a cappuccino to Leela.

“I *watch* the market. I did the big short in 2008 and did quite well.” Leela’s puzzlement was obvious. “That was recognition that the market was about to collapse then betting

on it. Debt, the real estate bubble, and more than a few well-cooked books would all come due. I bought *puts* on the S&P 500, mortgage companies, and banking stocks. Puts are bets that the underlying securities are in for a fall. Well, they fell and fell hard. I covered my positions and walked away with a princely sum. I even played the inevitable sucker rally.”

“Do you still play the market?”

“Nope. Not at all.” He noted that she expected elaboration. “For the same reason I did the big short: I have no faith in the competence or honesty of corporations.”

“Your success back in 2008 is why Woolfolk let you in the door. He wants some of your money.”

“I sent him a little bread and hinted more might follow. He lets me hang around. Offered me an office yesterday.”

“I see. Didn’t JFK’s father do something like the big short before the ’29 crash? A character in *The Razor’s Edge* shorted the market then too.” She stirred her cappuccino with a wooden stick and watched the steam rise from the eddying coffee and milk.

“Yep. A cab driver gave Joseph P Kennedy a stock tip and the old man took it as an ill omen. He said that when cabbies are giving stock tips, it’s time to sell. I tried to warn people of what was coming in 2008. They thought I was nuts. Everything was going up and everyone was making quick bucks. Mass hysteria.”

“What was *your* sure sign of a coming fall. Did a cabbie give you a tip?”

“Nope. I take the bus when I can. Even now. My sure sign came as I watched a man in a store get three different credit cards declined. He wasn’t buying a suit at Neiman’s. He was trying to buy a venti at Starbucks. I stepped up and said that the system must be down, and paid for his coffee.”

“Every now and then you display a glimmer of humanity.”

“He had a Desert Storm ribbon on his lapel.”

“Still counts.”

“Pretty sure he was an officer so I plead temporary insanity. I just bought you a venti, dear, and you’ve never hefted a rifle in your life.”

“My father had a Mauser K98 – a remnant from a German training mission in decades past. I fired it a few times when I was a girl. Out in the desert near Shiraz. I was a passable shot. Not like you, though, I’m sure.”

“Not like *Anthony*, you mean. He was a sniper. Pretty good with a fifty-cal rifle from what I hear.”

She looked at him and paused, gauging him as best as one can gauge him.

“So, Barrett, my one guess as to why you're here is that you're leaving town.” She was surprised that sadness came across her. “Rambling guy? There are things about you I couldn't understand?”

“Got to head back for a while. My neighbor's not doing well. Old guy, World War Two guy. As much as I'm intrigued by things going on in this town, I have to go back for a while.”

Leela looked into his eyes for something.

Nada.

“Just for a while.”

“I was at Keller's place today, just across the New Mexico line. West Texas is beautiful, in its way. It's not for me though.”

“New Mexico's not like Texas, Leela. Not at all. People don't care much about your business or how much you make or who you know.” Now Barrett looked for something in her. “You should come out there sometime. After the election maybe.”

It was the kindest thing he'd said to her in twenty years. He even held her hand.

Barrett helped Peter into his pickup at the VA hospital on Gibson, about two miles east of the airport where he'd left it at longterm parking. Up San Mateo to I-40, then east through the pass.

“I ain't so bad. Been worse. Been a lot worse. Just a little dizzy. Made me stay overnight. You didn't have to come all the way back. Next door neighbor Sarah's seein' to Jesse.”

Peter made it to his door with the help of a cane and a steadying hand. Sarah came by with the wolf when she saw the truck pull in. Jesse trotted up to Barrett and presented his thick ears for rubbing.

“He looks so mean but he’s a fine old gentleman. You can leave him with me anytime. Don’t have to worry about the coyotes comin’ near the horses with this ol’ boy around. Kids scared of him at first, till they get to know him. I won’t let them climb on his back and ride him ‘round the yard, though. No horsey-back rides on Jesse. See you boys, later.”

Barrett started to make omelets for dinner. It was early September and the peppers were still coming up from Hatch for sale on street corners, including one outside the VA hospital.

“I hope you didn’t get the hot ones. They’re a little too hard on old guys.”

“Like us.”

“Yeah, like us.”

After the meal, Peter had an inspiration. “Doctors didn’t say I couldn’t have a taste of Cal-va-dos.”

Barrett mulled it over and went to the kitchen for glasses and the bottle.

“Just an inch. That goes for both of us.”

“Both of us old guys.”

“Peter, how come you didn’t stay in the army?”

“Truth told, Barry, I wanted to. I was recalled when the Ko-rean War broke out in . . .”

“1950. North Korea invaded the South in June of that year.”

“Didn’t send me to Ko-rea though. Germany, intelligence. Stayed in after Ko-rea ended in . . . 1953. I was a major and thought I’d make light colonel in a couple of years, full-bull not long after that. Well, here comes a reduction-in-force list and I’m on it, sure as hell. Couldn’t figure it out. Had a pretty good record in the war and afterwards. So I ask a friend in personnel to look at my 201 File. He says my Officer Efficiency Report states I’m . . . wait, what was it? Says I’m ‘*overly solicitous toward*

enlisted personnel. Well now, what in hell is this all about? I think back and I recall serving tea to some of the boys in my unit at an off-duty gathering. *Off duty*, mind you. Wasn't at a payday muster. Well, that colonel sees me servin' tea and I see he doesn't like it *a-tall*. Not *a-tall*. Next thing, I'm back in the civilian world. All for being overly solicitous to my boys."

"So stupid. So bureaucratic."

"Back in the war, my boys didn't follow me 'cross France 'n Germany cuz I had goddam bars on my shoulders. They followed me cuz they trusted me and knew I was there with 'em right down the line. Never asked 'em to take risks that I hadn't taken myself. Somethin' changed in the army after 1945, I believe. Got all fussy 'n bureaucratic n' pompous. Like that *noblesse d'eepee* in France you talk about. Thought they knew all there was to know and they could write the American creed 'cross the whole world."

"Vietnam changed that, Peter. Least for a while."

"Only for a while. Those boys who were captains and majors in Vietnam became generals and they knew there were limits an' didn't want any damn part of fightin' all over the world."

"They're all retired now."

"Yeah, they're all retired. They could speak their mind more though. Shoulda spoke out against goin' into Iraq in 2003. When you got politicians who never wore a uniform and don't know much 'bout foreign lands, that's what you need. You don't need to be overly solicitous to enlisted personnel but you damn sure have to see they don't die for nothin'. Barry, the good thing about bein' old is that you can finally speak your mind and say go to hell to them that needs to be told so."

"Can't wait for my day, Peter."

"It'll come. Time and tide wait for no man."

A look of weariness came over Peter, soon followed by a look of sorrow. Not for what he said, but for his realization that time and tide were running out and as much as he loved Barry and wanted to talk with him about their wars and other things, those days were dwindling. He was letting go. He was giving his assent to leave. A look to Barry indicated that he knew it too.

Barrett thought back to events in Washington and wanted Peter's thoughts. How would he act?

"What do you think of Walton Hillock?"

Peter reconnected with the present quickly.

"That man has more ribbons than Ike, Bradley, Patton, and MacArthur all put together. Course his medals are the kind generals hand out to each other to make brags and help each other get promoted. He's what the ranchers over in Estancia say's 'all Stetson, no ranch'. Looks like he's gonna be the next president though. He's got the nomination 'n the election isn't long away."

"Do you trust him?"

"*Hell* no. You?"

"You're the only officer I've ever trusted, Peter. Here's to you."

Two glasses of Calvados clinked.

Barrett and Jesse walked up the deer trails of the Sandias' eastern slope and rested a while at a familiar reddish white boulder behind a few cedar bushes. Barrett looked out to the arid plains leading to Moriarty and Tucumcari. Jesse stood guard a few minutes then lay down so they could watch both ways on the trail.

"Well, Jesse. The country's falling apart and a general claims he can hold us together and solve our woes. Your thoughts are welcome as always."

Jesse stared at him with a look of comprehension and fearlessness. He made an indistinct guttural sound, part grumble and part growl.

"I'm going to look into that general. When we get home, I'm ordering some books and a dissertation. A dissertation's a long school paper that no one ever reads. Even my own, pal. Even my own."

The sinews and gristle of politics

Woolfolk and Leela went over the campaign three times a week. She handled the polling data, he the money. They collaborated on the media and in time it was clear she was excellent at it. Secretly, she despised it. It was akin to the propaganda of the shah and the mullahs.

The Project sent the Hillock people advice and talking points. The three debates between Hillock and Roberts had been uneventful. A few quick lines that reverberated in the media for a few days but nothing of Bentsen-magnitude. Neither candidate looked like a Quayle in the headlights. Neither looked at his or her watch. And each had been told how much a gallon of milk and a loaf of bread cost. The VP nominees were equally prepared and ordinary.

Candidates, Leela noted, are exceptionally well coached. Every syllable and gesture is tested on focus groups. Each candidate assured the American people that a win would lead to full employment, a balanced budget, peace, and all good things. Lincoln-Douglas, it wasn't. Despite the turmoil convulsing the nation, the public wasn't demanding anything more authentic and substantive. The public's credulity saddened her.

Barrett watched the debates and told Jesse that both candidates were overly solicitous to media and public alike and were unworthy of promotion. The great wolf seemed to appreciate his humor.

Hillock, to no one's surprise, was doing well with men, especially veterans, though there were sizable negatives from them too. Pollsters weren't sure why. The South, Midwest, and Southwest were solidly behind him, save for a few outlier states here and there. Nothing that couldn't be handled.

Roberts, again to no one's surprise, did well with women and minorities. The numbers, however, were not as high as in previous elections and polling data showed support

was rather soft. The Hillock campaign saw an opening and the Project council offered advice on the move.

Hispanic war heroes appeared with Hillock on the hustings, some of them proudly wore their Silver Stars and Purple Hearts. Two had Medals of Honor from Vietnam. Hillock thanked them for their service and valor, saluted them, and promised that under his administration, Hispanic veterans would be granted citizenship and the families of the fallen would be placed on a fast track for citizenship.

Roberts had no counter to this. Minority support slipped. It didn't help that her husband had been able to get into the New Hampshire national guard during the Vietnam War. That was no mean feat as the waiting list was quite long. Rumors persisted that his father, a well connected lawyer and political activist, had pulled strings, and that he stopped attending guard meetings before his enlistment expired. The distinction between rumor and reality in a political campaign is slim and usually irrelevant.

Journalists dug into the matter but couldn't find anything conclusive. So did the Project and its sister organization, the New America Campaign. They did find that no one in her family or her husband's had served since the Second World War. Nothing remarkable there, by Washington standards, but it was problematic when running against Hillock.

In addition to advice and talking points, the Project also sent money. Indeed, it sent copious amounts of money and directed its backers and followers to send copious amounts of money to local groups. So did People For A Strong America and Americans For Decisive Action. They sounded like grassroots organizations that sprang up from civic-minded people from Norman Rockwell paintings. Both organizations had been set up by the Project after the nomination in August, and Project money kept them in business.

Leela thought of creating a group called Americans For Looking Into Grassroots Organizations, and debated the merits of ALGO and ALGRO as acronyms. She had a director in mind. Donors, however, would be hard to come by with him at age helm.

Leela and Woolfolk went over the fundraising and ad programs every week. And every week Hillock was a little stronger. The money was rolling in, not only to the Project but also to the state campaign offices. Reverend Keller and his followers were also showing their faith in Hillock.

A groundswell was building for Hillock. Some of it was authentic.

Leela and Woolfolk watched the Powerpoint presentation by the media consultants they'd brought aboard. They were independent people, surprisingly apolitical. In private, Leela had discerned that one of the chief ones, Dr Journey Wilbar, was a libertarian who loathed both parties but who nonetheless would work for either one of them. His strict code of ethics forbade working for candidates of opposing parties if they were running in the same state. Neither Woolfolk nor Wilbar had ever seen a campaign so flush with cash. Each was pleased.

Hillock had strong leads, perhaps even insurmountable ones, in twenty-three states. Only two of them had a large number of electoral votes, so the issue wasn't decided. Woolfolk and Wilbar went over the list of swing states and the ads aimed at them.

Leela thought the ads were juvenile and offensive. Many were perilously close to defamatory. They had tested well with focus groups, though. One spot showed the Centurion Air Defense System, a multi-barrel gun mounted on an armored chassis. The Pentagon was lukewarm about it at best. The Centurion was to be made by contractors in five states, three of them too close to call. Roberts hadn't voted in favor of the system when she was in the senate. The ad ended with a shot of a "Closed" sign on a factory fence and a second shot of soldiers looking warily into darkening skies as they crouched in dank foxholes.

Another spot announced in sonorous tones that Roberts advocated negotiating with Russia over Crimea and the Ukraine. Woolfolk interrupted to say that the voiceover should say "she actually thought we could negotiate," with the narrator's voice conveying incredulity. Roberts, the spot continued, refused to support "decisive action" against Iran's nuclear bomb program. It closed with images of smoldering ruins in one place or another.

Woolfolk suggested closing with a mushroom cloud but Wilbar said it was too much like Lyndon Johnson's infamous daisy ad. Leela instantly agreed. Woolfolk shrugged his shoulders and deferred. He made a mental note to look for the daisy ad on Youtube.

The spot closed with Roberts's image dissolving into Neville Chamberlain's. Wehrmacht troops crossing a Polish checkpoint in 1939 became the famous footage of Russian troops standing guard and lowering the Ukrainian colors as locals look on fearfully. An umbrella is superimposed over Roberts's image.

"Jesus! That's great stuff, Journey!" exclaimed Woolfolk.

Leela wondered what the "decisive action" against her parents' homeland was and if it was still on the table. Not the time or place to ask, she thought. Did Woolfolk know?

Did Hillock speak plainly to backers about what his presidency would bring? She made a note to ask Woolfolk in private, should the situation allow it.

Another spot showed images of the Vietnam War. Helicopters pitching upward just before they touched down and confident young soldiers heading into battle; F-4 Phantoms hurled into the skies from carrier decks; Montagnard children smiling at a special forces clinic in the Central Highlands. “Valerie Roberts opposed the war.” More images, though now of angry grimy, snarled faces at antiwar demonstrations. A woman in headband smiles as she waves a Viet Cong flag amid a throng of joyful youths. “Who will Valerie give aid and comfort to next?” A quick flash of Vladimir Putin holding a pair of binoculars and looking out across a barbed wire border.

“Valerie Roberts criticized settlements on the West Bank designed to defend against terrorist attacks from al Qaeda and ISIL. She also refused to support making *all* of the holy city of Jerusalem part of Israel once again. We already knew Valerie didn’t believe in America. Looks like she doesn’t even believe in God.” A shot of the al Aqsa Mosque breaks apart into a thousand glistening shards and a photo appears of Hillock and Keller shaking hands at the reverend’s Muleshoe compound next to a small herd of calves.

A man in his fifties wipes his brow as he steps from a tractor and dons a veteran cap. “Valerie Roberts? She done nothing for the Veterans Administration in all her years. I got a son over in Iraq right now. Daughter too. And I want someone in the White House who knows what it’s like to be a GI and to be a vet, not just another Washington insider.” An image comes up of a despondent man in a wheelchair, quickly followed by a picture of Valerie Roberts in an elegant dress beneath a chandelier, the Capitol glowing brightly in the night through a magnificently-curtained window. General Hillock appears in combat fatigues, sleeves rolled up, engaged in an earnest discussion with soldiers who look up to him in admiration.

The next spot targeted younger voters. “I’m right out of school. I owe a gazillion dollars in loans but I can’t find a good job anywhere.” A half dozen friends stand around her, men and women, all races. A young black man speaks. “It’s the debt that’s holding us down.” A Latina adds, “And keeping us back.” All nod in agreement. A young woman begins to speak and eyes turn to her. “Walton Hillock says he has a plan to eliminate the debt and get this country working again. I believe him.” The young man adds, “I believe him, and I believe *in* him.” The young people look intently into the camera, confidently and hopefully.

Leela’s eyes halted in mid-roll as Woolfolk jumped from his seat. “Hot damn! Run that last ten seconds again! That ‘believe him, and in him’ line.”

They watched it again and Woolfolk was no less impressed. “That’s it. We have a buzz phrase. We have the goddam White House! I want that ‘I believe him, and I believe *in* him’ at the end of every spot. That’s damn good copy. Damn good.”

“Great idea, Mr Woolfolk. We can have people call it into talk shows, put it on bumper stickers, buttons, hats!” Wilbar sensed consulting pay dirt. He’d be as famous as the the guy who came up with “Morning in America” and “Focus like a laser on the economy.”

“We can get people to shout it out at rallies – spontaneously!” A thousand ideas flashed through Woolfolk’s mind.

Leela thought of some humor. “Shall we get *ibelieveinhim.com* registered? How about a Facebook page with it?” Leela realized her attempt at humor was misplaced before she even finished her words. They loved the idea and she made a note to get an intern to take care of it.

“Leela, it’s good to have you on board with the media game. How about another spot with a young couple watching Hillock speaking on TV. They nod their heads and hold hands. ‘We want a future for ourselves.’ The woman says, ‘And for our family.’ Then we roll the ‘I believe him, and I believe *in* him’ line.”

One stat puzzled everyone involved in the campaign – media pundits, consultants, pollsters, and the candidates themselves. Despite the close race and the crisis atmosphere, every poll showed that outside the faithful of both parties, the public wasn’t especially interested in the election, which was only six weeks away. Gallup said that only about 43% of the public intended to vote. And anyone who knew the first thing about polling and turnout realized that this meant the actual turnout would be lower. Pollsters asked why people didn’t intend to vote and were told that they were too busy, or didn’t like either one much, or didn’t think it mattered who won.

Leela was also puzzled by three questions that were being asked by a polling firm retained by Hillock’s campaign.

“Would you favor decisive action to end the gridlock in Washington?”

“Would you favor decisive action to stop wasteful government spending and get the economy back on its feet?”

“Would you support decisive action to protect our nation’s security?”

Clearly a push poll – one set up to nudge respondents in the direction of the candidate’s positions. Leela thought the questions inappropriate for a professional polling company. They were akin to questions asking if respondents knew about the other candidate’s divorce and DWI arrest. She noted the numbers of positive responses was surprisingly high, and going up every week.

Another puzzling question had been added to the end of the poll in just the last week.

“Do you believe America has a sacred mission to play in human history?”

Leela shook her head and went back to her office. She checked her messages for word from the lone wolf of New Mexico.

Hillock the rock star

After the closed retirement ceremony at Ft Bragg, North Carolina, Walton Ambrose Hillock took the media head on and to the surprise of many won over large parts of them. He took on their obvious inexperience with military people and came away with at least their respect. He was a handsome man of sixty, his hair gray along the sides, salt and pepper on top. Questions about his tinting the other parts were brushed aside good-naturedly. His voice was in the deeper registers and its timbres rivaled those of a voiceover specialist for documentaries.

He no longer appeared in uniform. He wore business suits, often enough light in color that he was told conveyed casualness and informality. He even appeared at some campaign stops in a blazer, without tie, top button undone. He could be seen riding horses in jeans, plaid shirt, and boots, or playing softball with factory workers after a hard day of work. The image of a hard-edged career military man had been softened and the public thought they knew the life of a member of the military caste.

Elaine Hillock could of course be seen gazing admiringly at her husband. There was more to her though. She was committed to a number of charitable works. Many of them coincided with those of the wives and husbands of senators and governors in key states.

Care was taken to soften Hillock's martial image. Spots pushed his casual, civilian side – on the links or listening to factory workers. The ads usually included a few quick takes of him in battle fatigues while in Iraq and Afghanistan, peering through binoculars from a razor-wired bunker across rubble-strewn terrain or speaking to a small number of GIs who were listening thoughtfully, M-4s slung or at the ready.

There's no better forum to sell a new image and reach young people than late-night talk shows. Hillock was booked on them all. When asked if he might not have the background needed for political dealing in Washington, he replied that he had negotiated with tribal chieftains in Afghanistan and Iraq, and won their confidence and

brought peace. On one show he quipped, “They made congressional leaders seem tame!”

Wilbar and Woolfolk watched the shows diligently and made a note to insert photos of the general with a chieftain or two into spots airing next week.

When asked about his relationship with Reverend Keller, a figure most Americans found off-putting or even outlandish, he had a ready answer. “No one who risks their life for this great country can fail to find strength and inspiration in Reverend Keller’s words. I think of him as the soldier’s best friend. He has inspired me and countless others in very troubling moments – moments I hope you never have to face, moments I hope our children never have to face. While he can speak his mind, too frankly at times, well, who of us doesn’t do the same. I’m not going to cast a stone at him. I believe he loves America as much as I do and wants to bring the nation back into God’s plan.”

One host was known to be rather hostile to the idea of a Hillock president and was almost certain to ask tough if not abrasive questions. Hillock sat down in the chair, handed the host a flower, and made the peace sign. The audience howled with laughter. The host was disarmed and the interview went fairly well. Footage rolled on news stations for the next two days. The media loved it.

Hillock’s spots began using quotes from gushing young people.

“He’s a born leader – and he was born to lead us.”

“American needs a strong hand right now.”

“It’s about time we had another general.”

“He’s gonna be president – soon.”

“We need to act decisively.”

Hillock became a pop culture figure. A country song entitled “The Man on the Mighty Horse” was widely thought to be about him. So was another called “Gettin’ Back to Basics.” Teenage girls, many not yet eligible to vote, thought he was “ahh-summ!” Some giggled before cameras and said he was sexy. Boys starting to wear their hair a little shorter. Enlistments were up in small towns and rural areas.

Wilbar and Woolfolk were amazed. The general was taking off faster than they had hoped. Their worries about a problematic austere demeanor eased considerably. He was a natural.

“He’s JFK with four stars,” Wilbar proclaimed in a background chat with reporters.

Moscow

Yuri Kulikov read the intelligence reports from the foreign ministry and FSB offices everyday. It was mostly dull-witted stuff written by obsequious functionaries, in his estimation – *apparatchiki*. They were incapable of original thought and simply wrote analyses that dovetailed with Putin’s vision of the world and his rising role in it. That was how Moscow worked since the tsars ran it.

“What is that American expression about boxes?” Kulikov spoke softly to himself as he listened to junior analysts walk down the hallway and talk about lunch and women. American idioms came and went in a matter of years. “Oh yes. Think outside the box.” Kulikov held that people who used that expression were utterly incapable of thinking outside a box, but he enjoyed hearing people in Washington use it. It was a sign that Washington functionaries and Moscow counterparts were equally unimaginative.

As head of the foreign ministry’s American desk, Kulikov read US news sources, watched its cable news stations, and even listened to its talk radio. Most was done online and it revealed things about America that were missed by security bureaus, including the cyberwarfare office in Kaliningrad which he’d directed to hack into US servers. He found Del Lewis exceptionally dimwitted but knew he spoke for millions of Americans.

Russian security bureaus had been scrutinizing Hillock for several months. Generals fascinated them, and also worried them. It was deeply ingrained in the minds of Russians, that their own generals could be restive. The Streltsy had risen against Peter the Great, the Decembrists against Nicholas I, and Stalin was ever fearful of his generals. That’s why he had so many shot. More recently, generals tried to overthrow Gorbachev but only succeeded in bringing down the Soviet Union and endangering the nation.

Foreign generals were of particular worry. Napoleon and his army had invaded in 1812, Hitler and his in 1941. Each brought devastation, though Russia crushed both invasions. When Kulikov watched Hillock speak and talk of America’s mission in the

world, he thought of a new threat to Russia. So did security bureaus, so did most Russians, so did Vladimir Putin.

Parts of the Russian bureaus had come to a consensus on Hillock. He was a tool of the American military-industrial complex which saw Valerie Roberts as bent on slashing defense budgets and withdrawing from many parts of the world.

Other parts saw Roberts as bent on no such thing. No American leader, they reasoned, could ever break from the powerful war machinery of the United States of America. It was the center of the country and a source of good-paying jobs in all fifty states. Anyone who tried such a break would share the fate of the Kennedy brothers. After the Cuban Missile Crisis, they became parts of what security bureaus called the “progressive bourgeoisie” with whom dialog was possible, though not enduring peace. Roberts was in this camp now. The FSB, in an effort to keep up with changing times, dropped the Marxian term “bourgeoisie” and substituted “reformists.”

Hillock was seen as opposing the Russian resurgence in world affairs that had been underway in the Ukraine and Transdnistria. He not only wanted to roll back the Russian forces, he wanted to organize Eastern European ultra-nationalists and Islamist militants in Russia’s Muslim regions and near abroad.

The US had already shattered Yugoslavia, Iraq, Libya, Syria, and Yemen into many pieces. It was now planning the same thing for Iran. Russia was next. The motherland would again be broken into several pieces, as in 1991, and another geopolitical catastrophe would occur. Hillock was the catalyst, coalescing military, corporate, and religious elements of reactionary America.

The plan was well underway. The US was flooding world markets with cheap oil and gas from its fracking revolution brought on by Texas businessmen. Saudi allies were boosting production just as they did in the 1980s to punish Russia for invading Afghanistan. Cheap oil meant reduced export revenue for Russia and that brought the grim prospect of fiscal collapse. That’s when the US and its allies would strike. That’s what all this talk of “decisive action” meant. It was a phrase understood only by adept American reactionaries and thoughtful Russian analysts. So went the theory.

Kulikov thought it true but like most government analyses it was simplistic. It would get the attention of the grandees in the Kremlin, though. No doubt about that. He accepted the manipulation of oil prices but thought it was tied more to getting Russia and Iran to force the Syrian government to the bargaining table.

He didn’t think the US was going to invade Russia. Americans didn’t know much about history but not even they could be so naive as to think an invasion would be anything but a long, bloody nightmare. Besides, their generals knew about Napoleon’s

invasion in 1812 and Hitler's in 1941. Both failed miserably because Russia was too big to conquer and the Russian people would harry the invaders incessantly. Kulikov still saw Hillock as a potential reckless force in the world and a menace to Russia. He searched for a way to use the American plot against them.

“After all, we play chess, they play football. I read Klyuchevsky, they listen to Del Lewis.”

Fort Bragg, North Carolina

Three airborne infantry battalions are on a field problem in the woods of the sprawling army post named after a southern general. In November, one will be the “alert battalion.” Its 600 troops will be confined to barracks. No leave, no passes into Fayetteville, no leaving the company area except for a quick PX run to get a burger. Back within thirty minutes or it was trouble. Lt Col Niven Grierson, the alert battalion’s commanding officer, would see to that. So would his company commanders and senior NCOs. Colonels Thackeray and Valsen were the same when their battalions were on alert.

Charlie Company is taking a break during a ten-mile forced march. Rifles, ammo, backpacks, helmets, body armor. At least it’s the fall and the temperature is only in the sixties. Everyone’s tired, though not so tired as to skip the time-honored pastime of soldiers everywhere – bitchin’.

“I was over there so goddam long I started to call those al Qaeda guys ‘Al’. Hey, Al. Why don’t you go back to Pakistan for a while?”

“Hey Al, go back to Saudi Arabia for a while!”

“Hey Al, show your head again for a second or two and I’ll fix you up with a bunch of virgins!”

A new trooper speaks up, more loudly and with more swagger than the norms governing a rifle platoon allow. Loud swagger was only for the guys who’d been overseas. The more time overseas, the more latitude.

“I tell ya, they send us over there then take us back home, then send us back over.”

The guys in the platoon looked at his patchless right shoulder and knew he’d never been overseas, let alone seen any combat. He’s a youngblood. He continues, without any encouragement.

“They don’t know what the fuck they’re doing up there in Washington. We had to go back to Iraq. We’re gonna have to go back to A-stan soon too. Mark my words, guys. Mark my motherfuckin’ words. A buddy of mine in intelligence gave me the word last week.”

“I developed a healthy skepticism of those intel people. When they say you’re gonna get hit, nothin’ happens. When they say it’s all cool, look the hell out. And if they ever tell you we’ll be greeted as liberators, kick ‘em in the goddam teeth.”

“Maybe a bit lower.”

A few guffaws. One guy performs a kicking motion and makes a squishing sound.

“So, youngblood with friends in high places, we are pleased to have your company on our leisurely stroll about rural North Carolina. You think things’ll be better if Hillock gets elected?”

“Damn straight they will. General Hillock knows what it takes to get things done. He’ll act like a *man*. Damn straight he will. I know it, you know it. The Taliban, al Qaeda, and ISIL or whatever the hell they’re calling it now, and the rest of ‘em know it too. They’re all afraid of him.”

Older guys talk among themselves, barely interested.

“Hillock pinned a Purple Heart on me at Bagram. Seemed like just another general. The higher you go up the ranks –”

The floor opened up for discussion.

“The more out of touch you git.”

“The more ass you kiss.”

“The more you see us guys as cheap poker chips.”

A platoon sergeant comes back from taking a leak behind a tree. He’s been listening.

“I hope you gentlemen are talking about the *officer* ranks. It is well established in that annals of military history that sergeants are the only people who know what the fuck’s going on.”

“Affirmative!”

“Huah!”

“And some of the junior officers and field grades.”

“Some. Not many. Just some.”

He strides up to the line of men and stands over the talkative youngblood.

“What we have is four-star PFC. Master of strategy. Speaks Pashto and Arabic and languages I’ve never heard of. Knows their ways. Experienced in battles from Ft Hood to Ft Bragg and a few bars in between. Boy, you were still in school when we were in Ramadi and Kunar.”

The guys laughed good-naturedly. The private feigns amusement while being dressed down. The sergeant continues.

“Good of you to grace us with your presence so soon after your lecture to the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the Armed Services Committee. Is everything meeting your expectations? Can I get you a little wine with your MRE this evening?”

There was a good deal of rapport and camaraderie in the platoon and everyone knew the sergeant was kidding. Partly. Everyone also knew that he’d been in Iraq and Afghanistan a total of five years since 9/11 and had more decorations for valor than any general today did. A fact he’d stated aloud several times in the NCO club and Fatalville bars – sometimes to mystified stares, sometimes to shouts of approval.

“Some wine would be nice, sarge. Nothing too fancy though. Might overwhelm the delicate seasoning of the MRE that entices my palate.”

“You are not even old enough to drink in the great state of North Carolina, rook.”

Louder laughter and hooting.

“So I can’t even bitch now? Is that what’s happened to this man’s army now, sarge? We all gotta be po-litically correct?”

“Bitch all you want, young man. Just don’t be too damn surprised if the older guys yawn or tell you to shut the fuck up. And know this, young man. You *will* follow orders.” The sergeant glared at the young man then allowed a trace of humor to come across his face. “Especially if *I* give them. Which will be early and often.”

“I know, I know. When you say jump, I ask how high.”

“On the way up, young man. You may ask only on the way up.”

The platoon knew who was boss.

And everyone knew that Lt Col Grierson was the boss of the battalion. Every captain and every NCO knew him, had eaten rations with him, and heard him speak about operations past, present, and future.

The battalions under Thackeray and Valsen were also tight. The troops, from sergeant major to buck private, respected their colonels and would do whatever they said. No matter what.

Wade Thackeray was a ring knocker, class of 1999, out of Lawton, Oklahoma, not far from Ft Sill where his father was an instructor at the artillery school. Rodney Valsen was commissioned a second lieutenant upon finishing ROTC at Gustavus Adolphus College in Minnesota. And Niven Grierson joined up after high school in Chalmette, Louisiana and went through OCS after being a sergeant for several years. He picked up a BA in history from Howard University in Washington, DC and was going to put in paperwork in a few years for an MA/PhD program at Princeton, on the army's nickel.

All three had parents and grandparents who'd been in Vietnam and World War Two. Grierson's grandfather had been killed on Bougainville while in the segregated 93rd Infantry Division. His grandfather's brother had been with the 92nd in Italy, and hefted a rifle in a company commanded by Edward Brooke. He stayed in for another twenty-five years, serving in Korea and Vietnam and making it to sergeant major. He had a Silver Star, a Combat Infantryman's Badge with two stars, and more than one Purple Heart. He never discussed any of them.

Thackeray, Grierson, and Valsen didn't speak much of their decorations, either.

Between the three of them they'd gone through fifteen combat deployments and two divorces. All three were on the fast track for general, all three had served in ranger units at one time, and all three had known or heard tell of Anthony Sabatini. He was a legend of sorts. Two hundred pushups at a time, dead-eye with any decent rifle from a Lee-Enfield to a fifty-cal sniper rifle, and a good friend to the Shinwari scouts he worked with in A-stan.

Story was that he and a Shinwari spotter went off on their own and came back with twelve confirmed kills. Anthony knew what the CIA trainers during the Russian war had complained of: Pashtun guerrillas don't change their infiltration and exfiltration routes as often as prudence calls for. Russian intelligence reports he read stated the same thing. Anthony plinked a dozen of them in a week. One was almost a mile away. No wind that day – tough luck for one Taliban guerrilla.

East meets the West

“I raised my hand, Barrett. I don’t know why. I just did.”

“This hand? This *lovely* hand?” She nodded and Barrett held it to his lips and gently kissed it.

“That’s it. That’s the one, you gallant man, you. If only you’d wear Ferragamos instead of Tony Lamas.”

“Luccheses, dear. My boots are Luccheses.”

Leela hugged him outside Los Poblanos, a hotel and meeting center secluded among tidily-shaped cottonwood trees east of the Rio Grande. Adobe houses both large and small were scattered across its twenty-five acres. Parts of Los Poblanos were a working farm, and laborers toiled in the fields where vivid lavender plants improbably asserted themselves out of dry brown soil.

“Woolfolk said he couldn’t make the meeting out here and asked for someone to take his place. I raised my hand. This hand that’s tingling from the lips of a gallant gentleman.”

“I’m glad you did, Leela.” He pecked her cheek as he loaded her luggage into the bed of his pickup. “I wouldn’t have wanted to meet *him* out here. Let alone take him back to my place. Oh, and please don’t let it get around that I’m a gentleman every now and again.”

“Why not? There wouldn’t be a dozen people in the US that would believe me.”

“These days people will believe damn near anything.”

A more meaningful kiss ensued once the doors closed. They drove out the tree-lined entrance and headed for Nob Hill, a half-bohemian, half-upscale part of town on

Route 66, where tattoo parlors and antique stores coexist in startling proximity to one another. That was Route 66. That was New Mexico. And that was Barrett Parker.

“I hear you can get your kicks there,” Leela offered as they headed south. The Rio Grande was higher than usual after the heavy summer rains. The sun was coming down in the late afternoon and hovering above the buttes and foothills to the west that hinted at the arid canyons farther west in Arizona.

They walked east on 66, occasionally arm in arm, past the costume store gearing up for Dia de Muertos, with skeleton costumes and leering skulls which lacked the levity of Halloween getup. Students from the nearby university campus strode in and out of the Pioneer Deli, some going back to their dorms, others to the bars and restaurants a few blocks down. A young man walked by casually wearing only a loincloth. Barrett said he was a local legend though little was known about him. “There are many eccentrics out here in New Mexico.”

“I don’t doubt that for a second. I do appreciate that you dressed more formally this evening.”

They came to a watering hole called Kelly’s that had been refashioned from a 1940s Texaco station. Leela recalled Barrett’s mention of going there to watch Redskin games. When they continued past it, she figured there might have been a girlfriend or two in there. They crossed the street and entered Yanni’s, a Greek place, tonier than the places they’d walked by. Paintings of sun-bleached Mediterranean fishing villages accented the walls. Broasted chicken, rice, and salad arrived with a carafe of Limnio.

“What machinations bring you and your kissable and tingling hand out here, Leela?”

She’s already drawn the line as to what she’d say. “I met with supporters – and donors. I’m sure you gathered that. Veterans groups, defense contractors, ranchers, religious groups, business owners. You know the lay of the land out here.”

“I probably know Iraq better than I know New Mexico. Speaking of ranchers, were they all about six-five? They might get too close to the steroid-laced feed.”

“I’ll mention your concerns next time I meet with them.”

“Their wives are usually six-one and about 185.”

“I’ll defer to your superior knowledge of ranchers’ wives.”

Barret's head slumped. "I'm misunderstood. So very misunderstood. So *tragically* misunderstood. I only see them in the grocery store in Edgewood."

"If I may continue, many were annoyed that their candidates pulled out during the convention. They'll get cabinet slots, some of them anyway. Donors and former candidates alike agree now that Hillock is the strongest candidate and they're pleased by his polling numbers. Up by six points over Roberts nationally and leading in many electoral college tallies too. Odd thing, though, most of them thought I was a Latina."

"Were any of the defense contractors from Alamogordo and White Sands?"

"Yes, Barrett, there were. They developed a new generation of bunker-busting bombs and want to export it."

"You know that bunker-buster was made for your native land. Specifically, the nuclear sites at Natanz and Fordo."

"Yes, Barrett, I do read up on things. Sometimes in your columns. Natanz is under a hundred twenty feet of rock and Fordo is burrowed deep into a mountain. Just how deep, we don't know."

"And if you don't know how deep the place is?"

"You bomb the entrance tunnels. And yes, we know there are fake ones. In any case, we're getting these people to do more fundraisers for the contested states. It's not in the bag. Valerie Roberts is thought to be developing a proverbial game changer. Moving to the left. That's fine. It'll present opportunities for us."

They browsed through a few shops along 66. One place, run by a young couple who knew Barrett by face, had a stack of lovely small rugs from Herat and finely detailed plates and bowls from the Fergana Valley in Kyrgyzstan. Barrett bought two bowls. "One for you, my dear, and one for my wolf."

Leela paused and studied him, as she had done many times in Chicago when he said something such as, "I bench press 330" or "I took this flag off an Iraqi tank".

"Barrett, you *don't* have a wolf. Please tell me you don't have a wolf."

He offered no reply, only his arm, and they headed for the car then through the canyon. The nightly illumination of Albuquerque gave way to the inky night of the East Mountains with only the lights from an occasional 18-wheeler and a few ranches on each side of the road.

Barrett opened the door and flicked on the lights.

“Oh my God, there’s a wolf in your house! Barrett, why is that huge wolf in your house? Another souvenir from Iraq?”

“This is Jesse, a Canadian Timberwolf. His precise pedigree is difficult to establish just now, but Canadian Timberwolves are not indigenous to Iraq, as far as I know. Friend to man, enemy to coyotes, all-round great guy. A *mensch* as you’d say in Farsi. Just between you and me, he sends a few bones to the Project every month.”

“Good thing we don’t look too closely where the donations come from.”

“I don’t doubt that for a second.”

Jesse stood up uneasily and came to the couple as they stood in the living room. An aging drafting table at one end served as a computer desk behind which was a hi-back leather chair – newish, Office Depot-ish. One entire wall was filled with some two thousand books arrayed untidily across six long oaken shelves separated by plaster doric columns. She ran a finger along one row and saw a score of titles on insurgencies, al Qaeda, and Vietnam.

Mixed in was a copy of *The Naked and the Dead*. She’d noticed a quote from the Norman Mailer novel in more than one of his articles: “We’re stuck over here God knows how long, just waiting and sweating it out, and finding out things about yourself that, by God, it don’t pay to know.”

“Is he friendly?” Jesse neared her, assessing her. She looked steadily into his large, intense eyes and saw interest but not a trace of malevolence. He made a conclusion about her then sat and presented his head to her.

“He’s magnanimously offering his ears for you to scratch. A more touching gesture of welcome and acceptance I cannot even imagine.”

“Then I would be both ungracious and foolish not to accept.”

“You would indeed.”

Leela’s hands moved slowly but not in the least tentatively to Jesse’s ears, impressing both man and wolf. She was amazed by how thick the wolf’s ears were, like boot leather. Cowboy boot leather, not the leather of her Prada slippers.

Barrett recognized, as did Jesse, that she understood canines. She didn't pat the top of his head or pet it back and forth. Dogs tired of that long ago. It was a tipoff they were in the presence of a novice and would have to be patient. Even wolves up in the hills got the word. Jesse closed his eyes and treasured her gentle massage. She passed his test of humanity and he would now defend her from any danger. It was his code.

"I think he likes me." Leela was pleased by her rapport.

"He likes Latinas."

She yawned and stretched her arms as she slinked toward the doorway, skillfully accenting her breasts. Her yawn turned into an alluring, feminine murmur. "Time for bed yet, señor?"

The hike up North Mountain began around noon. Jesse led the way. Barrett kept back with Leela. She'd at least brought tennis shoes on the trip. They ascended the sandy deer trails lined with cedar bushes that hikers had widened into a clear path over the years. Barrett noticed a "how much farther" look on her face, so they sat on a reddish-brown bolder and faced east. The terrain flattened out into a long, arid plain. Neither spoke. Jesse grumbled a bit as he lay his prodigious head on the sandy trail, eyes on the approaches.

"Friends tell me there are elk herds out there. They ask me to come along on hunts. I don't. I just tell 'em that most grocery stores sell meat these days and don't require you to get up early to go shoot some critter. Waste of time and sleep."

Leela knew, as everyone in Chicago knew, there were boundaries with him. Strict but unclear ones. The wrong question would elicit a terse, mordant answer or an icy stare. She'd seen him deliver both, much to the puzzlement of his interlocutors, most of whom avoided him from then on. She nonetheless sensed an opening that morning on the mountainside.

"I know there are some questions that are just no one's business. Believe me, I do. Still, I'd like to hear what it was like the first time you were shot at." She braced for the worst, though she thought the worst would simply be silence followed by a blunt segue to another subject altogether. She watched him looking out onto the plains of eastern New Mexico, just as he had the horizon on Lake Michigan. Staring, thinking, probably brooding.

"Along the Saudi-Iraqi border, a week before the outset of the offensive. The CO wanted a recon patrol to head out past the berms . . . into Iraq. It was hot and dull, so a

few of us volunteered. Yeah, you might say I raised my hand. The five of us headed out at four am and were maybe five kilometers in front of our positions. . . . Tracer fire came toward us – silently at first. Yellowish-green streaks lashed toward us from four hundred meters away. PK fire. Kalashnikovs too. In a half second – a long time in that situation – the tracers whipped overhead and to the sides, some close enough to whisper earnest threats to us. A second later the sounds of the gunfire reached us. Deep, pounding noises, like those of a jackhammer breaking up old pavement, though from a distance – 7.62 rounds make that sound. The sounds refracted off the outcrop to our right then reverberated behind us.

“First, I thought that I wasn’t really there and that it was a dream. Every American boy dreamed of war. Not a dream. My mind looked for something in my experiences to match up with this, to find something to help me. Part of our instincts, I guess. I thought of getting pulled over by the cops when I was sixteen and flunking a test in school. Those perils were of no help that day. This was more serious. No ticket, no failing grade.

“Then I thought, this is new, this is different, this is war. I expected something else. But this immense and incomprehensible thing is before me, right here and now, and I have to face it, endure it. And I might die, right here and now.”

“Were you terrified?” Leela thought of touching him, but didn't.

“No. I was riveted. I stayed down near the sand, the Iraqi sand, then watched the response from the guys in my group. The squad leader reported the Iraqi position and the rest of us returned fire. Our red tracer rounds lashed toward their yellowish-green ones in the dawn. Three mortar rounds thumped in ahead of us, the reports pounding in our chest cavities. Then came the loud cracks of our artillery as they answered on the Iraqi position. Mortars make dull thumps, artillery makes loud cracks. One of ours somehow detonated overhead with the sound of a lightning bolt hitting close by. Fragments made the Doppler sound as they shrieked above us. A logic was unfolding, with me in it. And everything, Leela, everything made perfect sense.

“In two minutes, it was over. Not sure what happened out in front of us. I only know I was riveted . . . by the sights, sounds, and the knowledge that I might die, suddenly and violently. I was in a war. And I had to face this cold, new, unforgiving experience – that day, and tomorrow, and the next day too. I looked to the east and saw the sun breaking the horizon of the desert floor. The morning was . . . amazing.

“In the next few days, the war unfolded, and I came to see death as an incomprehensible and relentless force in the world, a dark valkyrie that swooped down and took some of us. They weren’t slower or less skilled or less sharp than the rest of us. The valkyries simply took them, without reason or explanation, let alone apology.”

Leela had nothing in her experience to guide her. There were other questions but no more on that day. And there was that one question she would never ask.

She kissed his cheek and leaned against him and felt him lean back. The darkness soon passed.

“Why New Mexico, Barrett? You can write articles and watch the markets anywhere. I believe those things can even be done in Washington.”

She nudged her head against his shoulder.

“Not to be indelicate here, Leela, but it was on account of an old girlfriend. It seemed wonderful. A new life. All those things behind me. It didn’t last. Doesn’t matter why. So I moved out to the East Mountains.”

“Where you can stare out on the desert plains, just as you did Lake Michigan at the 55th Street Point.”

“Yeah. . . . I don’t just think about the war, though, if that’s what you think. If that’s what everyone in Chicago thought, they were wrong about me. I feel free in the limitlessness of a vast horizon. Free and fortunate. We’re all out here in New Mexico for one reason or another. Searching for something, running from something. The Land of Entrapment – that’s the unofficial state motto. You come here and for one reason or another, you just can’t leave. The space, the mountains, the freedom.”

“What else do you think of when you look out there?”

“I think that somewhere there are boys going through what I went through. What my old friend Peter went through at St Lo and on the Siegfried Line long ago. The fear, the hatred, the despair – and the astonishment. Somewhere, there always *are* boys going through it. And I think that over the millennia even the greatest civilizations have been based at least as much on war and killing as on economics and culture. You can have a farm or a mine, but you have to stop people from taking it from you.”

“So you make weapons.”

“Then bigger ones.”

The air was thin at 7700 feet and it was well into October. Feeling the chill, they wended their way down the sandy deer trails. Jesse was in the lead, confident in the

knowledge that a reward awaited him back home. They reached the two-lane blacktop that led back to his place and as they neared the iron gate, another thought occurred.

“It hit me a few years ago, Leela. A sudden realization . . . while up there in the foothills. No matter what I’m likely to do or achieve in life, it’ll never compare with what I did when I was nineteen, over in Iraq.”

They closed the gate behind them and headed for the house. That was the most baffling thing Barrett Parker had ever uttered to her.

“I would think that such a realization would be difficult and cause senses of . . . I don’t know, futility and senselessness.” She avoided the word “despair” as his confidence and wit made it clear that word didn’t apply. He was detached and aloof, yet he fixed on things and continued his education each day.

“No. No, not really. It’s a perspective . . . an interesting one. It isn’t nostalgia or obsession. Peter said the same thing about his war. Others said it about theirs too. What we did wasn’t wonderful or heroic or anything to boast about to people, no matter how eager they are to hear it. It was *important*, though. It was *extraordinary*. And in a way that can easily be misunderstood, it was *great*. It made us who we are, more than our parents or our schools did. Neither I nor anyone like me attaches any family-like sentiment to the war. It was more like an unforgiving orphanage that imposed its rules on us, then, in a day or two, sent us into a confusing, almost unrecognizable place, replete with smiling yet unwelcoming faces. And we were on our own in that foreign land we grew up in.”

Leela thought about his words on the plane back to DC but came to no better understanding of him or how such a realization could arrive without bringing on complete despair. She believed him; she just didn’t understand him. In that tension and contradiction she pitied him, was interested in him, and wanted to help him. She was also fascinated by him.

Getting to know General Hillock

Books on civil-military relations contend that the American military is professional and stays out of politics, aside from budgetary issues and broad strategic debates. At one time, most officers didn't even vote. Though not forbidden or looked down upon, voting was deemed unprofessional. No matter who won, after all, soldiers were obliged to obey new presidents – no matter how callow or hawkish the new commanders-in-chief are, no matter how adroit or artless they are, no matter how respectful or disdainful of the military they are. Those were the rules and professional soldiers swore to follow them, and did.

Barrett thought this was too broad a statement for any time, let alone now. The books were written by scholars who had little if any military experience and had adolescent attractions to the military and war. This contributed to the authors' credulity. He knew too many active duty officers who openly expressed disdain for the current president, and for many of his predecessors over the last fifty years. Colleagues in State and AID heard the same things, and were annoyed. Some were worried.

In any case, those books did not touch on the ethics and risks revolving around a retired general running for president in a time of domestic and international crisis. America was in a period of political paralysis and danger. An unknown figure was ascending to prominence and large portions of the public were enamored by him.

Barrett found a website with War College papers, including Hillock's 1986 master's thesis. It was on the French military in the period between the First and Second World Wars – a period of political paralysis. The generals saw the rising danger from a resurgent Germany but were unable to convince the politicians to put the nation on a more vigilant stance. Paris preferred to hide behind the Maginot Line. The generals, Hillock concludes in a brief closing passage, "owed their country more than demurrals in the face of domestic paralysis and international danger."

Barrett recalled a lecture he'd heard decades ago that said the French army had more tanks than the Wehrmacht did, and had superior tanks as well. The French generals

failed to develop tactics and doctrines to use them effectively. They didn't know how to face the challenges of their day. But he wasn't debating Hillock; he was analyzing him, trying to understand him.

As a promising full colonel, Hillock earned a doctorate in government from Cornell. His dissertation, an elaboration of his earlier work on the French army and politics, covered the period from Bonaparte's rise to power to the colonial wars in Indochina and North Africa. Barrett scrolled through the first two hundred pages then focused on the post-1945 wars. Hillock argued that the French army had faithfully obeyed Paris's wishes about restoring the empire after World War Two. It had developed counterinsurgency doctrines and established their effectiveness in Algeria, only to have politicians decide to abandon North Africa.

"It was Charles de Gaulle who opted to grant Algerian independence! *General* Charles de Gaulle." A dozing wolf opened his eyes for a moment before settling back into slumber. He'd seen Barrett's agitation many times.

There was an article by Hillock in *Parameters*, an army journal, on military service and the right to vote in Antiquity. He looked at Athens, Sparta, Rome, and the Germanic tribes that Tacitus had studied. Hillock concluded that military service had been cornerstones of democracy. The expansion of the franchise, as during Rome's Samnite conflict, had weakened not only the democracy but the army as well. Service fell increasingly on a handful of Romans and foreign tribes. Most citizens were free to conduct lives of dutiless indulgence.

Barrett looked through a few hundred photos of the general. Most were posed or on the campaign trail and revealed nothing. Consultants tell their clients to be careful while out in public. Don't look bored, or angry, or even annoyed – unless it can pass as righteous indignation. A confident smile should be as much a part of you as your suit and tie and the appropriate lapel pin.

One photo of Hillock in his Centcom headquarters caught Barrett's attention. Sitting at his desk, Hillock looked slightly cocky, even smug, as he addressed a handful of colonels and one-stars. There were several photos on the wall behind him. He zoomed in and recognized MacArthur and Patton. A third eluded him so he copied it, cropped it, and ran it through iPhoto's sharpness and definition features. The figure had a gaunt face, Scotch-Irish – the people who migrated from Protestant Ireland in the eighteenth century and became the core of the American military.

A Skype window popped up to tell him of an incoming call. It was a 202 number and the Project's exchange. His heart gladdened, much to his surprise.

“Hi, Leela. What’s new?”

“Sorry to disappoint you, Barrett, but it’s only me, *Dai uy* Sabatini. We’re having another conference on Kurdistan next week with some intel and special ops people coming in. I’d like you to sit in and hear what’s afoot.”

“I can be there, *Dai uy*.” Barrett paused as he weighed whether or not to ask something. “Anthony, have you read any of Walton Hillock’s writings?”

“Oddly enough, I’m reading a bunch of it now, including his Cornell dissertation. I’ll bet I’m the first one too.”

As he packed up for the trip and explained things to the wolf, he kept thinking of that third photo. Early 1960s photo. Scotch-Irish fighting stock. It came to him as he loaded the trunk and coaxed Jesse into the backseat. It was General Edwin Walker. Kennedy canned him for holding political indoctrination lectures for his troops.

Barrett pondered that a while, then recalled that earlier President Eisenhower had ordered him to see through the desegregation of the Little Rock school system. Walker performed his duties professionally, and for the first time, black children of Arkansas went to school with white children.

“Who knows, who the hell knows.”

Moscow

Yuri Kulikov, the lead Americanist in the foreign ministry, had been granted a meeting with President Putin. The foreign minister had arranged it but would not be in attendance. He claimed he had a conference to attend in Belarus but Kulikov suspected he didn't want to be too closely associated with what might be called a hare-brained scheme.

How would the Russian president respond? He could award Kulikov the Order of Putin or he could throw him in a dank cell deep beneath the Lubyanka.

Kulikov went over his notes once more. He'd been allotted thirty minutes. There were places where, had he been addressing the Duma or a gathering of ministry powerholders, he'd have inserted a witticism or two. Putin, however, didn't seem to enjoy humor, unless it was his own and at someone else's expense.

He exited the limo at the Senate Building, a neoclassical building built around a rotunda within the Kremlin complex. He breathed in and assumed a look of confidence and authority. He entered the building and was escorted down long corridors lined with rococo busts and paintings of illustrious figures from Russia's days of greatness. "Russia's past, Russia's future," he thought to himself.

The escort handed off his charge to Putin's dour chief of staff who told him to be seated. He did so, wondering if Putin would be too busy that day or was falling into a foul mood or was signing arrest warrants for who knows who, for who knows what.

From inside the president's office, he heard a woman singing gently and playing a balalaika. The performance suddenly stopped in mid-stanza. Kulikov shuffled through his briefcase and went over his representation once again.

Shortly later, the chief staff listened intently to his earpiece and motioned for Kulikov to rise. He led him to the office door and whispered, "You have fifteen minutes." As

Kulikov entered, a woman in traditional peasant garb, balalaika slung across her shoulder, was leaving by another door.

Putin sat behind an only moderately-sized wooden desk with a lamp, appointment book holder, and pen case in green marble, each emblazoned with the double-headed eagle. The mahogany panelling behind him held pictures of Peter the Great, Nicholas I, and a man Kulikov thought to be Felix Dzerzhinsky, the head of Lenin's secret police. Putin was inserting a metal key into the side of a can of sardines and briskly turning it until the top came off and the heavy smell of fish and canola oil wafted across the room. A silver fork and a green bottle of Polustrovo water lay before him. The president looked authoritative yet jarringly out of place. A Leningrad street brawler was sitting where tsars and premiers had sat. A tin of sardines stood in for Caspian caviar on Fabergé crystal. Kulikov shuddered imperceptibly.

Putin motioned for him to sit at a small table in front of his own, and he continued looking over a few papers before brusquely signing them.

"One of the last of the Habsburgs observed that being emperor was an agreeable position, but it required signing too many papers. It's still true. Now, Kulikov, tell me of this plan of yours from the foreign ministry." Putin leaned back in his chair, put his feet on the desk, and gestured to begin. Disinterest was plainly written on his face as he took in a forkful of sardines.

"The West seeks to break Russia apart, as it has already done with Iraq, Syria, Libya, and Yemen. We must take positive steps to ensure this fate never befalls us. The United States isn't united. That is to say, the country is no longer a coherent nation-state. The radicalism of the sixties, the influx of minorities and their high birth rate, the polarization since the Reagan years – these are pushing the country to the breaking point."

"Forgive me, Kulikov. Please do not tell me that the country is on the verge of another civil war. Fort Sumter, Gettysburg, and that courthouse. What was it? Appomattox?" Putin stuffed more sardines into his mouth and reached for his bottled water.

"Mr President, the prospect of a war to preserve the union in the twenty-first century is not likely. Americans will go their separate ways. The red states and the blue ones, the cities and countryside, the whites and blacks and Mexicans."

"And what shall Russia do? Shall I send our special forces to seize the armory at Harpers Ferry and urge the oppressed masses to rise up?" Putin's triumphant snicker degenerated into a boorish sneer. The sardines hadn't been entirely ingested.

Kulikov was struck by the president's knowledge of American history. Such breadth was rare in the KGB, from which Putin had risen. He sensed humor in his words. He also sensed impatience.

"The presidential campaign, which is quite close, pits a progressive against a reactionary. We should do what we can to see that the reactionary general wins."

Kulikov expected surprise or annoyance but Putin looked interested, as though these thoughts had already occurred to him. Kulikov continued. "A reactionary president will be deemed unacceptable by the comfortable middle classes, the minorities, and the cities."

"Then again, Kulikov, a progressive president will excite similar responses from rural-dwellers, the religious fringe, and the military. Will he not?"

"Indeed he will, Mr President. However, the reactionary general is seeking to fundamentally change the American political system. He will push congress aside, embark on dangerous military ventures, and elevate the religious fringe's hopes to national policy. This will be intolerable, and the country will break down. This of course will leave Russia as the strongest power in Europe, the Middle East, and North Africa. Our friends in China will control East Asia, South Asia, and Africa. The American Century will have ended, and the century of Russian-Eurasian mastery will have arrived."

Putin nodded. Kulikov felt he was making an impression.

"So you recommend I become a midwife then. And what should the president of Russia do to help General Hillock become the next – and last – elected head of America? Speak! I do not have the time or inclination to divine what the foreign ministry or FSB is thinking."

"The best way to help General Hillock, and to break apart America, is to act aggressively in our own region and in the Middle East. Bold military moves will rankle reactionaries in the American electorate and tip the balance to Hillock."

The sardine tin and fork were on the desk. Putin took a gulp from the green bottle then stared at Kulikov. His look was no longer menacing. Kulikov had Putin's interest.

"And where shall I make these bold moves? Besides Harpers Ferry, that is."

"Mr President, in Latvia and Kazakhstan – of course. These are regions that have been part of Russia for centuries. The Russian people there live in fear and oppression.

They thirst to see us come to their aid. Forgive me, sir, but it's well known that we have troops in place."

Putin nodded for a few moments but revealed nothing. He picked up the tin and shoveled in the last of the sardines.

"Thank you, Kulikov. You may leave."

He stood and headed for the door which was being opened by the chief of staff. The terse dismissal made him rethink his impact. Had he wasted everyone's time? Would Putin demote him, or worse?

"Kulikov. . . ."

The minister turned around in the doorway with trepidation.

"Sir?"

"Send me a full report on this. And come back here tomorrow at one pm. There'll be a lunch." Putin waved him away once more.

Kulikov thought how much he loathed sardines, then thanked the president of Russia.

Whiteman AFB, Missouri

Two men of a B-2 crew are called in for a briefing on a series of training missions. The briefing is conducted by a one-star out of the Pentagon. The harsh institutional lighting gives off a hum in the nearly empty room. The squadron commander was present at the beginning but he excused himself before the briefing officer started. The only maps were of the Middle East.

The two men are instructed to fly into the eastern Mediterranean, refueling twice along the way. First from a KC-135 out of Andrews, the second from one out of Incirlik, Turkey.

Their B-2 will be armed with two GBU-57A/B bombs, otherwise known as Massive Ordnance Penetrators, or simply as MOPs. Each MOP is twenty feet long, thirty inches in diameter, and weighs fifteen tons. Two and a half of those tons are high explosives. The bomb burrows deep into the ground before detonating. It was designed for Iranian nuclear targets but it's a versatile weapon.

These bombs, the crew is told, will not be set to detonate especially deep. When the co-pilot asks if the target was under solid rock or burrowed into a mountain, he is told that it's not relevant to the mission right now. That puzzles him. A glance from the pilot indicates he should shut up.

The co-pilot is also puzzled by not knowing even what country the target is in. They are told that arrangements will be made to neutralize the air defense systems of countries in the region. Combined with the B-2's stealth properties, that means no one would see them. Further, they will launch the weapons from a "standoff" position, not in the airspace of the target country.

The crew will fly a training mission into the Eastern Mediterranean once a week. They'll reach an area south of Cyprus and circle in what was known as a fail-safe position – a term from the cold war that retained a sense of urgency and danger and

pride. The actual mission was projected to take place in two and a half months. Late January.

After the briefing the crew inspects the MOPs in the armaments bunker a mile and a half from the flight line. They'd seen them before. Many times. They'd even helped hoist them into bomb bays and deploy to Diego Garcia, where they were certain they'd get the go ahead to hit the Iranian nuclear sites of Natanz, Fordo, and Parchin. Things cooled down and the strike was scrubbed. Many of the pilots were relieved at not having to fight Iranian fighters and missiles for an hour or two. The pilot chosen for the January mission was disappointed the go-ahead never came.

They also visit hangar Mike Sierra-4 which holds their B-2. Their usual ground crew had been replaced by the crew that handled special ops.

On the way to the parking lot the co-pilot can't help but express his thoughts on the mission. He might as well. He can't do it off-post or at the O Club.

"It isn't Iran this time. We know that. Then again, they might be messin' with us about that eastern Med location. We might just get a drink from a tanker out of Incirlik and fly right on to visit the ayatollahs."

The pilot simply shrugs his shoulders and continues out to the lot. Sensing his co-pilot's annoyance, he speaks as he reaches his SUV parked next to his co-pilot's Avalon.

"Maybe we're going to hit the Syrian president while he's having breakfast. That'll ruin his day. I wonder what he has for breakfast."

"I hear he likes Pop Tarts. Raspberry ones."

"Then I have at least one thing in common with the man. Raspberry Pop Tarts are a great way to start the day or a tasty treat on long missions. Don't leave the ground without them."

"Maybe we're gonna hit an ISIL training base in eastern Syria again."

"Could be. We'll know more someday. Or else we won't."

The pilot hops in his car, starts it up, and with a courteous wave, he drives off.

The co-pilot watches as he heads for the exit. On the rear bumper of the SUV is a sticker that reads, "The Day Is Coming – Soon." There were more than a few of them at Whiteman.

“Another Keller supporter. That guy’s nuts.”

Doern & Vollmer

Woolfolk debated whether or not to have Leela sit in on the meeting with the investment bankers and people in Hillock's economic reform team. It was one of the Project's more secretive and controversial projects, especially in its implications. Woolfolk liked to joke that the meeting was only for the Project's Jedi Warriors and 32nd-degree members.

Leela had performed in an exemplary manner throughout the campaign, in both organizational and creative aspects. She interacted well with people in and out of the Project, in part, he thought, because of her exotic looks. Woolfolk knew her attractiveness helped create an atmosphere of attaining great things and diversity. He liked to say that she was "easy on the eyes."

Yeah, Leela would be on board at the meeting.

Reinhard Doern and Hollis Vollmer set up their investment banking firm in the boom years after the Civil War. They'd presided over the rise of American greatness by financing its steel and oil and railroad enterprises. Reinhard Doern knew Andrew Carnegie and the elder JP Morgan personally. He had also been an assistant treasury secretary in the second Grant administration, before resigning.

In the early twentieth century Doern & Vollmer helped Britain build mines in Rhodesia and Malaya, and fight Germany in the Great War. One of Hollis Vollmer's sons was on the *Lusitania* but was able to scurry onto a lifeboat and make it to the Irish shore. After the war, Doern & Vollmer took pride in getting Germany back on its feet and when the next war hit, the firm became more active in bonds, helping the US and Britain win the war. Public debt continued well after 1945, right up to the present.

Woolfolk and Leela walked briskly from the former's office into the meeting room. She'd looked into Doern & Vollmer and was intrigued. "Don't they give money to both sides? Are they hedging their bets?"

“Yes, they hedge their bets. Most Wall Street outfits do. Nonetheless, you’d be surprised how many people in the investment banking world are on the other side. Makes no sense to me.” Woolfolk’s nose wrinkled with disdain. “These guys here today are all on the same page with us, though. In any case, they’re not here to toss a few quarters in the kitty. This is, well, a little bigger. You’ll see.”

Leela saw a paternal look on his face, as though he were initiating a junior person into a higher level. A dozen men filed in. Some shook hands with people they already knew. Leela didn’t think they were all investment bankers. Three Chinese men struck her as high-ranking officials from the embassy or ministry of finance. Two had shorter and less meticulously coiffed hair than the others and their suits were less striking than the Brionis she’d become accustomed to in Washington circles. Their attire was more mid-market, like something off the rack at Macy’s. Not high-rollers. They didn’t fit in.

Woolfolk welcomed everyone to the Project meeting and asked Walter Vollmer, the chief executive officer of Doern & Vollmer, to give an opening statement. He stood amid the rows of seated men and two women and looked about him for a moment. Pure show, in Leela’s estimation.

“How did it ever come to this?” Vollmer looked about the room. It was more for effect than to elicit others to speak. “Look at the level of public debt in our country. Twenty trillion dollars. If you stack twenty trillion silver dollars, it’ll reach some planet well past Saturn. If you pack twenty trillion dollar bills into railroad cars, they’ll reach. . . . Goddamit, enough of those moronic media illustrations! They don’t get anything done. The people gathered today in this room are used to getting things done and know how to get things done!

“Look what’s happened overseas. Russia defaulted on its debt. So did Argentina. Greece and Spain and Italy and Portugal needed the Germans to bail them out. People ask for more things from government and politicians don’t have the guts to tell them no. The debt goes up and up, and taxpayers have to pay the bills.”

A number of guests looked to Vollmer.

“That is, *high-end* taxpayers have to pay the bills!”

The guests enjoyed a little levity, allusive though it was to something that pained them and played no small part in getting them aboard the Project’s political agenda.

“The bondholders, domestic and foreign, worry about the US government going into default. I can’t believe I’m saying this. It’s true. You know full well it’s true. We’ve heard the politicians say they’re going to Washington to trim the fat, make the

government do what every household has to do – balance its budget. What happens? What comes from these promises? Nothing! Not a thing! Not . . . a . . . goddam thing!

“I think it’s fair to say that those of us here today no longer trust the American political system to deal effectively with the debt and a number of other vital matters. Do we move to some place safe and responsible? A place with a more hospitable political and business climate? There are people in this room who would welcome our enterprises in their country! They’re concerned too. They have too much money on the line.”

One of the men Leela deemed to be military looked briefly to Woolfolk. The director spoke up.

“We share your concerns and have for a year now. We’ve discussed it with our legal people and with our constitutional people. We’ve asked people in those fields in other organizations too. The finest legal minds in the academy and corporate law offices have looked over the Project’s Debt Initiative and find it sound. Sound as the dollar once was. Just between you and I, we’ve had four justices on the Supreme Court come out favorably on it – informally, of course.”

Everyone hung on Woolfolk’s words. They hadn’t come to hear Vollmer’s histrionics. Woolfolk held the pause until the tension was almost painful.

“Our Debt Initiative is as bold as it is desperately needed. A bold step for desperate times. We propose to cut the national debt by over half, with the stroke of a pen. *Poof!* Ten billion dollars of debt gone.”

Looks of incredulity were everywhere, except with Vollmer and the military figures. Leela thought Woolfolk was about to be fired for sheer windbagery. The only way to cut the debt so drastically would be through default, and no one in the room would stand for that. It would ruin many of them.

“Hear me out, hear me out. Who owns most of the debt, my friends? The banks? Our Chinese friends? Nope. They’re pikers. Forgive me for saying so, but they’re not the big bankrollers. Who is? It’s the Federal Reserve Board. The Fed. Fifty percent. The Fed holds half the national debt. They can write it off like that.” Woolfolk waved his hand in the air. “They don’t have shareholders. They don’t have any board of directors except themselves. The Fed can waive ten billion dollars of debt without anyone being harmed, without anyone having a say. It’s all in the hands of the Chair of the Board of Governors of the Federal Reserve System. One person.”

Leela noted the looks of astonishment coming across many of the faces. She kept her neutrality. Those that weren’t astonished, she judged, were in on something. They

knew about it before the meeting convened. They knew that the Fed could waive the debt it held and they knew Woolfolk and the Project had something arranged.

Vollmer stood.

“What makes you think the White House and congress won’t just run up more debt?”

Vollmer spoke with neither ire nor conviction. Leela judged his tone to be inauthentic and part of a script. She was watching something unfold and she was part of it, though the denouement still eluded her and there was none of the thrill she once felt on meeting the powerful.

“The president will veto any budget with a deficit and he will deflect – through the use of decisive action – any attempt to override his veto. These extraordinary means have been made necessary by our times. We can all agree on that. Furthermore, the president will use these same means to require congress to submit only balanced budgets. If they do not, they will be excluded from future budget discussions under the emergency powers authorized by the US Constitution of 1789.”

Leela instantly noted the phrase “decisive action,” echoic as it was of the Project’s polling questions and policy positions. Yet no one but her was interested in its meaning. Everyone was looking intently at Woolfolk as he proceeded. Everyone but the military people, who looked down at their notepads when he uttered the two words, enunciating them meaningfully.

Vollmer faced Woolfolk, chin jutting upward, his chest thrust outward, meager though it was.

“How can we be sure that the Federal Reserve will write off this ten billion dollars of debt? The Fed is independent of the presidency and congress and the public. Forgive me for saying so, but the Fed doesn’t even have to answer to Borden Woolfolk and the Project for a New American Democracy.”

Woolfolk appreciated the wit as he stood and walked toward him amid the rows of seats.

“I feel I can reliably state that upon election, General Walton Hillock will swiftly nominate a new chairman of the Federal Reserve. And I can say without fear of contradiction that he will nominate a man to that office that everyone here knows will run that august body in a responsible manner. That man, upon whom the future of America and our plans for it depend, is here with us today. That man, the next Chair of the Board of Governors of the Federal Reserve System is . . . Walter Vollmer.”

A few men gasped in amazement. It was as though a gifted magician had just executed an amazing reveal. Others sat impassively as though they'd seen it coming. Vollmer stood next to Woolfolk and the two men shook hands vigorously. The men in the room began soft, respectful applause and formed a line to express their congratulations and hopes for the future of the country.

Leela applauded late and unenthusiastically. Excusing herself with a quick look to Woolfolk, she returned to her office. She sat in her chair and looked about at the Project folders and pamphlets on her desk. There were too many wild and uncomfortable ideas racing through her mind – what she'd seen and heard and what her mind or imagination was adding.

An email came from Barrett apologizing for his quick departure. Attached was a photo he took of a desert cactus in full fuchsia bloom.

“There's hope for that guy . . . I guess.”

Fort Bragg, North Carolina

Three light colonels leave a meeting at divisional headquarters, not far from the main PX and the lush golf courses. They wear camouflage fatigues with wreathed rifle badges on their chests, ranger tabs on one shoulder, combat patches on the other. Their left shoulders have the “AA” patch of their present unit – the 82nd Airborne Division.

The workday over, they head for the officers mess to get coffee and shoot the breeze before going home, though one lived on-post in a BOQ. The other two are on separate rations, so they hand the orderly a few bucks each and get in line.

Everyone there is a major or higher and most know everyone else. Some had served overseas together and some had attended advanced training schools. They’d all jumped out of airplanes together. Perfectly good airplanes. And they all knew the joke about that.

There’s lots of talk about the Middle East and who’s just come back from where. As much as they liked to talk disparagingly about Iraq and Afghanistan they still cared about those places. The tribal chiefs they’d parleyed with or bought off, the watering holes that found ways to bring Jack Daniels and Bud into an Islamic country, and the compounds and villages they’d defended from the Badr Brigades and Taliban.

They disliked most of those places yet wanted to know what was going on there. It was like a girlfriend after a less than amicable breakup: you still want to hear about her, and after a while, wish her the best.

There’s talk of Washington. Grumbling about the indecision – going over, coming back, going over again. The army wasn’t like that. Once an order came down, you stuck with it. Unless Washington said otherwise.

Another difference was that you didn't think and act according to what the polls said, or what inexperienced advisers said, or what some Washington think tanks, lobbyists, and trade associations said. Not directly any way.

The three colonels are listening more than talking. That have their opinions, but mostly they think the talk of late has been unprofessional. So they listen as they drink their coffee and eat danishes after scraping off most of the frosting with a knife.

“I got nothing against a woman like Valerie Roberts being president. I really don’t. We have women generals now.”

“Not in 82nd Airborne, we don’t”

“They’re coming.”

“I like to hear about women coming.”

“I’ll bet that’s all you do is *hear* about it.”

Good-natured guffaws ensue. No one’s feelings are hurt.

“Valerie Roberts might be a fine lawyer and senator. She just isn’t what the country needs now.”

Nods and murmurs of approval for a statement ably masking hostility in a professional and putatively apolitical setting.

“Who do you think is best for the country now?”

“You know damn well and don’t tell me you don’t think the same.”

More nodding heads and approving murmurs.

“We can’t sit by and let Putin retake Eastern Europe. And in the Middle East we still have al Qaeda and ISIL carving out territory and lopping off heads. They’re starting to strike here now. Those groups could unite one day, from Algeria all the way to Afghanistan. They might just get that caliphate if Roberts is the next president.”

“I hear she and her husband are going to church now. Pretty much for the first time. There are camera crews with them, of course. Nice show for the American people. Her side has been taking religion out of the country for too long.”

“I’m not sure I could serve a President Roberts.”

“You mean you’d resign your commission and become a VP at some defense contractor? Now *there’s* some good news for once!”

Ribbing laughter from the chorus.

“I didn’t say that. Didn’t say such. I just don’t want to see her in the White House.”

The nods and murmurs of approval are less vigorous. A line is close to being crossed, if it hasn’t already.

“We took an oath to serve and defend this country. And may I remind you, that everyone here took that same oath.”

“You neglected, good sir, to mention the part about defending this country from enemies – foreign and *domestic*. And in the course of human affairs, we have seen fit to treat harshly with enemies – foreign and *domestic*. British enemies back then, perhaps home grown and elected ones in our day.”

Our three colonels are still silent. Annoyed by the last remark, but still silent. But one of the other officers turns to our three.

“Colonels Thackeray, Grierson, and Valsen. You three are highly esteemed here. You must have some thoughts. Share them with your fellow paratroop officers in the revered, sacred, and above all, confidential meeting place and informal war room known as the officers mess.” He bowed comedically and motioned for the men to take the floor.

Col Thackeray, a West Pointer, complete with the ring, chose to speak.

“Having listened to my esteemed fellow officers speak their minds in this hallowed room, I have but one thing to say, and note it well, good sirs.”

The hall fell silent. Men at other tables put down their dining utensils and listened. Thackeray was a rising figure in the organization. The silver oak leaf on his uniform would be replaced by a star in a few years, with two or three more after that within a decade. The futures of Grierson and Valsen were no less promising.

Thackeray enjoyed the tension and bided his time before speaking.

“I’ll say this one time. And I’ll say this Lima Charley. . . . *I want you all to shut the fuck up!*”

The hall stood silent for a few more moments. An order had been given. Thackeray's words caught everyone off-guard. The meaning was clear to most, though not all. The mess hall staff looked on in confused interest before returning to their work.

The motion of Col Thackeray's hand indicated he had more to say.

"Now pass the goddam salt . . . please."

The assembled officers sat in silence before light, brief, nervous laughing could be heard. Then someone passed him the salt.

"Well, since you said 'please'."

More laughter, less nervousness.

New Mexico

Barrett sat in the leather chair, warmed his throat with lemon tea, and looked into the camera. The interviewer this time was an Indian woman with a Cambridge accent – a marvelous combination for him.

Anchor: We have Barrett Parker with us to look at the rather startling events in one of the most remote parts of the world. Earlier today President Putin *may* have sent troops across the border into Latvia and Kazakhstan, though they are not in Russian uniforms. What's behind this?

Barrett: Putin denies any such action but notes the need to protect the large ethnic-Russian populations in those two countries. His foreign minister, Mr Lavrov, has advanced the claim that the US is planning to use Kurdish allies to overthrow the government of Iran then move into Kazakhstan.

Anchor: Any truth there? There's clearly been American activity in Kurdistan for several years now.

Barrett: The US may want to use the Kurds to break off the Kurdish parts of Iran, not to move into Central Asia. There are some rather fanciful thinkers who would like to see that, but they are not in a position to do anything except to talk about it.

Anchor: The US has expressed concern over Kazakhstan, hasn't it?

Barrett: Yes, the concern is that Russia will seize Kazakhstan's Tenghiz oil fields and the pipeline systems running west to the Mediterranean and east to China. This would make Russia even more powerful in energy markets and form a tighter partnership with China.

Anchor: Any chance of a vigorous response from the United States?

Barrett: Probably not. The US still relies on Russia to deliver supplies into Afghanistan, where there are still tens of thousands of American troops and even more contractors and aid workers.

Anchor: Isn't Pakistan a viable alternate route?

Barrett: Afraid not. Pakistan simply isn't reliable. Its generals routinely close down access through what's called the Southern Route. The Northern Route passes through Russia and Russian-controlled countries such as Uzbekistan. Oh, and the supply lines begin in Latvian ports.

Anchor: Isn't Walton Hillock promising a more robust response, if elected?

Barrett: Yes, he is. He flew to Brussels yesterday and met with the alliance's political and military leadership.

Anchor: Pardon me for interrupting, but Walton Hillock is *retired*. Isn't it highly unusual for there to be a meeting like this with a civilian, and one who is seeking high office just now?

Barrett: It's *exceptionally* unusual. It's a clear sign that NATO is worried about its very existence and that it feels someone like Hillock is needed to keep it intact.

Anchor: What sort of actions do you think will come of this unprecedented meeting?

Barrett: General Hillock has already stated in his acceptance speech at the party convention last August that he will send US troops to fight Russia in the Ukraine. That may be updated to include Latvia now.

Anchor: And what of Kazakhstan – a distant land unknown to almost all Americans?

Barrett: Intelligence and military people tell me that if Russia invades Kazakhstan, Hillock will deploy special forces to Kazakhstan. They will build an indigenous resistance movement, and sabotage the pipelines and the Russian space facility at Baikonur. There are also plans to train Lithuanian and Estonian personnel to cross into Russia to attack trains and bridges.

Anchor: And all this is taking place amid a close presidential campaign with many voters still on the sidelines. There's increased talk of regional secessions if

Roberts wins. And we now have several major cities calling for autonomy if Hillock wins. Can you recall any election like this?

Barrett: I'm afraid we'd have to go back to 1860 for anything like this. Putin sees what's going on in the US and sees the political paralysis as an opportunity to reestablish Russia's position in the world.

Anchor: What is Ms Roberts's position?

Barrett: She's advocating calm and diplomacy, which may be the smart move but it isn't doing her any good in the polls. She's still behind Hillock with only two weeks to go until the election.

Anchor: There's talk of her coming out with an ambitious domestic agenda to be called The New American Initiative.

Barrett: Indeed, it is ambitious. She's calling for a very high inheritance tax. Any estate over \$10 million will be taxed at 90%. This is her answer to Hillock's claim of having an innovative policy to deal with the debt and spending.

Anchor: How does she justify such tax levels?

Barrett: The wealthy have benefited mightily from the costly wars they started, while less-well-off Americans have suffered the casualties. Her campaign is running a spot showing a group of exuberant well-dressed executives at lavish soirées, closely followed by an interment at Arlington.

Anchor: Ms Roberts is also calling for the breakup of agribusiness holdings and a redistribution of the land to family farmers.

Barrett: Yes, she is. This has corporate America concerned that a President Roberts would break up many other large corporations. She has been vocal about congress's forgetting about anti-trust legislation that both parties once supported.

Anchor: We'll see what comes of this. Thanks, Barrett Parker.

Barrett: Thanks for having me.

Barrett leaned back and took a sip of now-tepid lemon tea. He'd seen many strange and bewildering things in his day, but recent events were setting new levels and he feared for his country. Khadija saw the exhaustion and sadness.

“Barrett, I’m a producer, not an analyst. But all this talk of war and secession and jarring economic changes is worrisome, even in Doha. World markets are crashing, companies are laying more people off. What are those lines of poetry about armies clashing by night and anarchy set loose upon the world?”

“A little Arnold, a little Yeats. Khadija . . . I’m impressed.”

“You think we only read Omar Khayyám over here? I majored in English at Berkeley, I’ll have you know.”

“Berkeley? Then why aren’t you quoting Rod McKuen.”

“I don’t recognize that name, though I sense your deadly pan humor is at play, at the expense of a simple Qatari woman.”

“In full burka?”

“A dress from the Saks in Dubai, as a matter of fact. You know, Barrett, if a Middle Eastern country became as muddled as America is today, the security forces would step in.”

She saw Barrett drift into thought and worry. She regretted her words and was about to apologize when a cheerful look came upon his face. She braced herself.

“And you know the first thing those security forces would do?”

“Go ahead and tell me. My finger’s on the cutoff switch.”

“They’d confiscate all the cowboy boots.”

“Time for you to ride off to that saloon, *pardner*.”

“A man’s gotta do what a man’s gotta do.”

“Ah, that great American poet – Gary Cooper.”

The fall quarter was underway at the University of New Mexico and Barrett ambled along the quadrangles near the bookstore just north of Central. Students milled about at the main gate and sat in small groups. Barrett eavesdropped, hoping to hear talk of

the upcoming election. The conversations were more about which teachers graded hard and the Lobos' disappointing performances in the first half of the football season.

To the side were booths with bright banners reading "I Believe in Hillock" and "Roberts for Change". A few students milled about taking leaflets and listening to the spirited words of the volunteers. No debate, no argument, no interest. A camera crew from KKOB interviewed a handful of students but the crew was disappointed that they hadn't gotten any memorable lines.

He walked a few blocks east toward Kelly's and passed a pair of campaign workers handing out leaflets there too. Not many takers. Inside Kelly's, Dee Dee, a barmaid he saw occasionally, drew a Guinness from the tap on noticing his entry and brought it over.

"You still saving the world, Barrett?"

"Still trying, Dee Dee. Anybody talking about the election these days?"

Her cheerfulness flagged. "Not much. A week ago some people started to, but a fight broke out. A couple of APD guys were in a booth out front and they put an end to it before it got too far. All in all, people are just fed up with the all the nastiness in politics. I sure am."

"Me too. Me too. I just watch the flow now."

"Living in New Mexico does that, Barrett. That's why most of us are here."

"I have to head up to DC for a while. Be back in a few days. God willin' and if the creek don't rise."

"Barrett, you have no idea how funny that expression sounds comin' from you!"

The Committee on Kurdistan and the New Iran

Barrett's flight flew low over the Potomac as it neared the airport. He looked to his right at the intelligence hub in Langley and then at the graceless hi-rises of Roslyn and Alexandria and Crystal City. It wasn't like Baltimore or Chicago where people loaded and unloaded ships bound for other countries, or manufactured things for markets in the US and abroad. That kind of work rooted people in something earnest.

Down there along the Potomac? He imagined them filled with people who worked for the sprawling, intrusive national security apparatus that burgeoned after World War Two, solidified itself through the Cold War, and took on new functions after 9/11 that the public wasn't allowed to know about. Reports were being written, files closed, dossiers opened.

How many of them thought no more of the election than how it would bear on their jobs and mortgages? How many had adopted their institutional outlooks as desirable and necessary and inevitable, gladly casting aside whatever they'd learned about history and privacy and quaint but outmoded ideas from eighteenth-century thinkers? No matter that there were monuments honoring them. This was a new era and the towers along the Potomac were taking charge.

How many will accede to whatever the guardians of national security dictated, no matter how much they'd blundered over the last half century – especially after 9/11? What wouldn't they do, and who wouldn't they round up if ordered to?

The plane touched down before Barrett got too annoyed and he was relieved that Homeland Security looked for bearded men with intense eyes more on boarding than on arrival. On checking his email, his irritation dissolved and an unfamiliar sense of warmth and well-being and belongingness came over him.

There near the luggage carousel was a lovely Iranian woman.

“Not sure why I’m doing this. Not even sure how long you’re in town for this time.” She looked askance at him for a moment then sighed. “Yes, Barrett, you can stay at my place.”

Barrett hugged Leela and rocked her in his arms, back and forth. They headed for short-term parking and anon they were cruising up the GW Parkway in her white Porsche Cayenne. She caught Barrett looking at her legs.

“Stop checking me out like that or I’ll drop you off at the next scenic overlook.”

“On the flight I kept thinking of those seamed nylons you mention from time to time.”

“Poor boy. It must have been a long flight. Terribly uncomfortable too.”

“No woman could ever understand just how uncomfortable it was.”

“I enjoy making you uncomfortable.”

“You and, in a different way, half this town. You’ve heard about the meeting on Iran tomorrow, I trust?”

“You trust well, Barrett – in a way. I thought it was more on Kurdistan. What are you trying to tell me?” Barrett’s regard held the annoying look of an advanced grad student she’d seen long ago. “Okay, what are you *not* trying to tell me?”

“Unless I miss my guess, the Project’s interest in the Kurds has less to do with their independence than with their usefulness in weakening Iran – no, in *destroying* Iran.”

“I’ve gotten that sense around the place. Their interests are less than idealistic and far from honorable.” She turned to cross Key Bridge and get on the Whitehurst. “Tell me, is it true that Anthony Sabatini blew up the Parchin Revolutionary Guard base?”

“Is that what Woolfolk thinks?”

“Yes, it is. A lot of people at work think the same. Woolfolk’s proud of it. Sabatini has covert ops written all over his face and a few other Project staff do as well. He winces from time to time as he walks or stands up, and people say he was shot in Iran, probably at Parchin.”

“He was a ranger in Iraq and A-stan. Don’t know what he did with CIA. One does not ask about that stuff.”

“*You* didn’t ask?”

“Nope.”

“You just talked about your war experiences then.”

“Nope. Most veterans I know don’t do that. It’s bad form. Rather puerile.”

“You didn’t even talk about that stuff to wow fetching women students in Chicago, as I recall.”

“Most grad students are offended by such talk and are uncomfortable around veterans. Besides, I like to think I have other attractions to wow fetching women.”

“At times you do. When you weren’t staring out into space or playing basketball at Henry Crown. So back to cases. Can I *tag along* to the Iran meeting?”

“Hell fucking yes. I want you there.”

“Nice to be wanted.” She drove down into the Envoy parking lot. “Then we’ll have to get to sleep early tonight.”

Barrett slumped back into his seat, two hours of in-flight daydreaming down the drain.

The Project’s main conference room was filling up before ten am. Barrett and Leela, well rested, sat in the aback. Anthony soon joined them.

She studied the new faces in the meeting as best she could without annoying them. Their lean, military appearances drew suspicion. Three were Middle Eastern in appearance, two were not. They all had accents. She recognized a figure on Hillock’s national security team. No one from congress. Not even a staffer.

She noted that Barrett nodded surreptitiously to a man she judged to be Israeli. Military? Mossad?

Woolfolk welcomed the attendants, though without his usual unctuousness and wordiness. He refrained from introducing the speakers and began with a summary of oil markets. No one thought this was an investment seminar.

“American oil production has increased 30% in the last seven years and we no longer rely on Middle Eastern oil. This has given us unprecedented leverage with the Saudis

and other Sunni oil producers. We defend them from ISIL and other enemies, foreign and domestic, and they owe us – big time.

“They’re buying more of our weapons but more importantly, they’re pumping oil like there’s no tomorrow. They did the same thing back in the eighties to punish the Soviet Union for the war in Afghanistan and it helped bring about the collapse of communism. They’re doing it now to bring about the collapse of Iran.”

Leela concealed her dismay. It grew as she looked about the room and saw only keen interest.

“Iranian export revenue is down 60% since the sanctions hit and Sunni oil production rose. Sanctions are easing but the mullahs are still low on money and the country is unraveling. We plan to nudge that process forward a bit.” Woolfolk paused and winked to the audience. “Maybe more than just a bit.”

A few polite smiles appeared briefly.

Woolfolk motioned for one of the speakers to take over. He remained at his seat and began to speak. His Middle Eastern appearance was not contradicted by his accent.

“Iran is 60% Persian and the rest are Balochs, Azeris, Arabs, Luris, Bachtiaris, and Kurds. We have had contacts with leaders in most of the areas and they believe, as do we, that the disintegration of states in the region – Libya, Yemen, Syria, Iraq – will and should continue in Iran. The self-determination of people is an important principle in world affairs, and history is presenting us with a historic opportunity to put that principle into action.”

Leela noted that his taut, austere face rarely looked up from his notes and his presentation was uncluttered by inflection or flamboyancy. A man of action, not words.

“These allied groups inside Iran, with proper help from Washington, will rise up, fight the Revolutionary Guard troops that occupy their lands, and break free of the mullahs’ tyranny.” He motioned to Woolfolk’s assistant who projected an immense map of Iran behind them. A different color represented the distinct ethnic regions, mostly in the west and southeast.

“Our colleagues in Saudi Arabia and elsewhere have promised financial support for these independent regions until such time as they become self-sufficient. We are especially hopeful for the oil-rich Khuzestan region in the west and the mineral-rich Baloch region in the southeast. Without those regions and their resources, there isn’t enough money in Tehran, and there is no Iran.”

Leela saw another Middle Easterner make a quick nod with a measure of pride on his face.

“Uprisings will be followed by calls for independence by the US, Saudi Arabia, and other aligned nations. This in turn will be followed by a concerted bombing campaign and an uprising by three divisions in Iran’s regular army. We are in routine discussions with key generals. They despise the Revolutionary Guard Corps and are eager to return their country to democracy.”

Woolfolk’s assistant showed a tighter map depicting bridges and Revolutionary Guard bases in the separatist regions.

“The air campaign will be conducted by several allied nations. Three US aircraft carriers will be deployed in the region, and hundreds of US fighter aircraft, including the new F-22s and F-35s, will be deployed to Bahrain and the Emirates. The roads and bridges leading to the disputed regions will be destroyed, limiting Tehran’s ability to reestablish control. Iranian troop movements will be neutralized. Iran will go the way of Syria, Iraq, and the others. And the Middle East will be the better for it, as will our interests.”

The man signaled Woolfolk that his presentation was over.

Other speakers discussed the troops strengths and reliability of the Balochs and Azeris, though the longest speaker talked of the Iranian Kurds and how smuggling networks had been bringing in arms from Turkey and Iraq for over a year.

Anthony whispered that the speaker was a colonel in a Kurdish faction with little pull with the main factions in Erbil. He was boasting of things he could never deliver. Barrett let out a barely audible grumble.

The meeting adjourned without opening the room to questions or debate, surprising Leela. Barrett whispered.

“Leela, this isn’t a proposal being bandied about. My sense is that it’s been bandied about for years and we are witnessing the final draft shortly before it’s put into operation, say, early next year.” He surreptitiously pointed to three men, all Americans, who hadn’t spoken. “Any idea who they are?”

“One is a former three-star thought to be a potential head of CIA. The others I don’t know. Probably Hillock people too, though.”

“So it’s all coming into place, dear.”

“Yes, it is. I don’t think it will work though. But there’s one good thing.” Barrett sensed an impending barb and braced himself. She patted his hand and whispered, “You’re learning to keep your quasi-cowboy mouth shut.”

“I’m like that when I get a full night’s sleep, ma’am.” He regretted his words instantly.

“Good to know. You can count on more good nights’ rest *chez moi*. Iranian hospitality.”

Barrett slumped back. “Y’all come back,” he murmured to the men filing out.

Leela simmered. The program against Iran didn’t rile nationalistic sensibilities. She wanted the mullahs out as much as anyone in the Project. She thought the Project’s ideas impractical, even foolhardy. It was more likely to lead to wholesale slaughter of the rebels.

Ideas in Washington, she was learning, were often foolhardy, preposterous, and dangerous. But this was essentially a sales town and foolhardy ideas were the main product. An idea is advanced somewhere and it comes to a turning point, like an idea for a movie pitched to a producer. It can get the attention of a think tank or two, a few congressional staffers who whisper it in the ears of their bosses, and maybe a radio show or two. Then the idea becomes part of a debate, a narrative, a campaign. Money comes in, no matter how preposterous and dangerous the idea may be. That’s how things got done in Washington.

Sometimes, that’s how wars got started. Other people faced the consequences. No one in Washington did. Nor did their children. Guys like Barrett and Anthony faced the consequences.

With the room near empty and Woolfolk gone, Leela motioned for Barrett and Anthony to listen to her. Her voice was hushed. Concern was plain.

“Gentlemen, we should talk with a friend of my late father. Will tonight work or did you have another seminar on smooth and costless regime-change scheduled?”

Barrett was starting to love her again.

The Del Lewis Show

“My friends, if I sound a little more agitated than usual, it’s because I *am* more agitated. I’m agitated by the agitators. Those leftist agitators in the Roberts *onslaught*. I won’t call it a campaign or a movement anymore. It’s an *onslaught*. An onslaught on everything we Americans hold dear. An onslaught on our beliefs, values, and now our property. But you already knew that.

“She’s calling for state confiscation of wealth. What’s next, a guillotine in Lafayette Park? Well, the place is named after a Frenchman so we’re halfway there already. She wants to seize farmlands too. Collectivization of agriculture, liquidation of the kulaks. It’s all in the communist handbook. You don’t have to read it ‘cuz I’ve done the reading for you already. It’s a chilling read, my friends, and you don’t want to know how the final chapters played out in Russia and China and North Korea.

“What is big business? It’s what provides the jobs in this country. It’s what brought down the Iron Curtain. It’s what pays for the cockamamie social programs that the Roberts’ onslaught wants. This bashing of big business must stop. No, this bashing of big business must *be* stopped!

“It will be stopped. Trust ol’ Del. It will be stopped.

“You can’t run an economy on socialist principles and you can’t confront the march of tyranny in the world with words. That’s the mistake Chamberlain the Umbrella Man made with Hitler, and it’s the same mistake that this Umbrella *Woman* is trying to make with Putin. By the way, friends, keep sending those bumbershoots to the White House.

“She says that General Hillock is too much of a hawk. I say Roberts is too much of a chicken. No, she’s an ostrich with her head buried firmly in the sand. Putin’s sitting up there in his Kremlin, probably in the same chair that Stalin and Brezhnev sat in, and he’s laughing. He’s laughing out loud cuz a Roberts presidency would be just fine and dandy with him. He’d have Latvia and Estonia and Lithuania too. Then Kazakhstan and the rest of the ‘Stans would be his too.

“You heard what happened last night on the streets of our Nation’s Capital? If not, ol’ Del’s gonna let you know right now. No media spin. Just the facts. Admiral Clement Lorain, director of the National Security Agency took in a basketball game and as he was coming out, someone took a shot at him. We don’t have all the details but it’s clear that the shooter was someone inflamed by the Roberts onslaught’s rhetoric. Thank heavens Admiral Lorain wasn’t harmed.

“Oh, Lord. Oh, Lord. I’m looking at the latest polls and Roberts has picked up four or five points since she went off on her anti-big-business rant. The race is a dead heat now. Well, isn’t that just a kick in the rear end.”

Del paused a moment as a message from his producer flashed across his screen. “Keller’s on Line 3.” Del rolled his eyes.

“Folks, we reserve a line for very busy people who are friends of this show. We’ve had General Hillock on in recent weeks and we’ll have him on again as election day nears. Or should I say as it *looms*. Right now we are very fortunate to have with us the Reverend Everett Willis Keller. Good afternoon, Reverend, and welcome back to my little radio show.”

“Not so little, Del. Not from what I’m told. All fifty states and on Armed Forces Radio across the free world too.”

“You’re very gracious to point out the success that has been given upon me. It humbles me. And I’m sure you agree that what we’ve striven for and hoped for and prayed for is in danger.”

“Yes it is, Del. It’s not just our belongings; those are mere material things without any great meaning to righteous people. It’s our way of life, our freedoms, our sacred honor. That’s what’s truly at stake.”

“So true, Reverend. So true.” Del winked at his producer who was always amused by Keller and did a hilarious impression of him at staff parties.

“Del, I believe in the power of prayer and I know the multitudes of your listeners do as well.”

“That they do, Reverend.” Del saw his producer nodding fervently as he mimicked Keller’s flock.

“We must pray for America. We must pray for her as never before. For she is in danger as never before. The Lord has sent this great nation a challenge – one He knows we are up to. And I believe He has sent us a man to lead us from this moral cesspool and political morass we find ourselves in. He has sent us General Walton Hillock to us in these dark days. He will restore America to her place in the world and help her fulfill her great mission. In times like ours, we must rise to the challenge and see that the laws of man are made by flesh and blood, by too human flesh, and are subject to pride and error. The Lord’s laws and the prophets’ visions must take precedence.”

Sensing that Keller’s mind was wavering into predilection with prophecy, which Del found confusing and peculiar and ridiculous, he thanked him and went into a station ID.

As the bumper music came up, Del wondered if Hillock believed that stuff too. No matter. They were all on a great ride. Del’s producer wondered when and how the ride would end and if he could jump off before it reached the end. Del asked the intern for an extra inch or two of JTS Brown. She complied and drained the bottle before Del’s eager face.

“Thanks, darlin’.”

Glen Echo, Maryland

Barrett rode shotgun in Leela's Cayenne as they drove up Canal Road overlooking the palisades of the Potomac near Chain Bridge. His occasional glances at her legs brought stern glares. The road became MacArthur Blvd and the Maryland line was just ahead. Anthony sat silently in the back, looking about warily as was his wont.

They passed the defunct amusement park on the left and turned up a steep driveway. Leela pressed down on the accelerator and the Cayenne was up to it, bringing them to a brick colonial house overlooking the boulevard and the river. They were greeted by an Iranian man in his mid sixties.

"Leela!"

"Gentlemen, this is Mehdi Knadjian, former colonel in the Iranian army, both before and after the '79 revolution. Colonel Knadjian, this is Barrett Parker and Anthony Sabatini."

They exchanged salutations and handshakes before being led inside. Barrett felt sure Knadjian had recognized Anthony's name.

The interior was rococo, reflecting the French influence on the Persian upper classes in the days of the Pahlavis. Gold-leafed mirrors and picture frames. Anthony was dazzled by the rugs. "A Lesghi in the foyer," he noted as they entered an expansive living room. "And a dome Tabriz here, unless I'm mistaken."

"You are not mistaken. You know the rugs of Leela's and my country, Mr Sabatini. And quite well, it would seem. How is that?"

Barrett was now sure Knadjian had heard the story about Anthony and Parchin.

"I lived in Kurdistan for many months. And what tribal elder doesn't grace his dwelling with the exquisite products of Persian looms?" Anthony was taken aback by

his own flattering talk. He realized he'd been in Washington too long and thought of his friends now battalion commanders at Bragg.

"I'd think they'd be more partial to their own tribal rugs. I've one in my study." The colonel was looking circumspect at a man he knew to be CIA or former CIA. That organization had a decided ambivalence with most Iranian ex-pats. Langley had loused their country up for many decades, at least since helping the Brits oust Mossadeq in 1953, but CIA afforded a little hope of bringing improvement someday.

"Oil wealth has done wonders for the Kurds. Their merchants travel regularly to the bazaars of Tehran for Isfahans, Qoms, and Tabrizes. This splendid Tabriz reminds me of a Lavar Kerman I saw in one of Saddam Hussein's palaces in 2003." Anthony's face became uncharacteristically vacant and contemplative. "I looked upon it at length, and in great wonder, as someone might on seeing the Notre Dame cathedral or Mont Saint-Michel – or the Sheikh Lotfollah Mosque in Isfahan. May I confess something to those in this room?" Knadjian looked intently to Anthony. "Saddam wasn't home just then and I failed to take my ranger boots off before walking on his Lavar Kerman. We drank his scotch, too. A single malt."

Barrett thought Knadjian enjoyed Anthony's wit, for the moment.

"I'm sure a little sand on his rugs and some missing scotch weren't the worst things to befall Saddam in 2003." He invited his guests to sit down and poured each of them a glass of Shiraz that had been brought in from Canada to circumvent the sanctions. "No one realizes that the Shiraz grapes came originally from Iran."

"From southwestern Iran." Anthony spoke up again. "Shiraz is now a rug center for the tribes of that part of the country, including the Qashqai."

"And the Khamseh," Leela said.

"Yes, the tribal confederation that gave us your family. It's been years since my work or travel took me to southwestern Iran. I was with Iranian army intelligence, both before and after the '79 revolution. I had the honor of working with Leela's father, the late general. We were farther north though, as was the Iraqi army and their Sunni backers."

Leela's face brighten with pride at mention of her father. The colonel continued.

"I too met with Kurdish elders in their homes. We supplied them with weapons to fight Saddam during the war of the 1980s. I also countered Saddam's attempts to bring Iranian Arabs in Khuzestan province over to his side. Well then. We are not here to talk about rugs and wine and old events. Let's speak of new events – and prospective

ones. Tell me what you will of this morning's meeting, to which I was somehow not invited but which I somehow know of!"

Barrett summarized the Project's meeting on fomenting unrest inside Iran and fragmenting it. Knadjian listened, occasionally nodded, but waited for the end before commenting in crisp, stern words.

"I was approached by people in this movement, as were several other of us who were in the Iranian army. They presented themselves as representatives of a future US president – a man of vision and what was it, *decisive action*. They wanted our opinions on whether the regular army would support an uprising against the Revolutionary Guard and the mullahs. We told them, and in no uncertain terms, that the regular army would not support an attack on our native land. Yes, the regular army is weary of the mullahs and opposed to the arrogant Revolutionary Guard. However, rising up against them in . . . what is the word? Ah, in *caboots* with the US and other foreign powers? No. That will never work."

"Hence your not being invited to this morning's meeting. What about other groups inside Iran?" Barrett asked the instant Knadjian paused.

"The Arabs will not support an uprising. Nor the Kurds or the Azeris. Not in large numbers anyway. Did you know that the Supreme Leader is an Azeri? Does your friend Borden Woolfolk know this? Walton Hillock? I doubt it. The US will only have the support of the Mujahideen-i-Khalq, the Kingdom Assembly of Iran, and the Arab Struggle Movement." Seeing a look of incomprehension on the faces of Barrett and Anthony, he explained. "The Kingdom Assembly of Iran is a group with the fanciful objection of restoring the Pahlavi monarchy to Iran. The rest? Small bands of terrorists."

Leela's eyes rolled. "That's like restoring the United States to British rule today. Iran has changed too much since the shah fled. The Pahlavis are gone and only a small, irrelevant fringe want them back. Let them stay in their mansions in Potomac and Beverly Hills."

Colonel Knadjian continued.

"The Balochs in the southeastern part of the country are seeking independence. The Saudis give them money. Pakistan helps at times, too. There's potential for the American plan in Baloch lands in the southeast. Not elsewhere though. The uprisings may jar the country for a few weeks, a few months at most. They will be short-lived and the fearful repression will be long-lived and long-remembered. The mullahs and

generals, too, have their plans, but they can see them through. The denouement? The Revolutionary Guard will be more firmly in control than they are now.”

“More so than the mullahs?” Barrett asked.

“More so than the mullahs. There is something appallingly clever in their otherwise foolish plan.” Knadjian basked in his guests’ curiosity. “They may be planning to blow up a major holy site.”

“In Qom? Isfahan?” Leela was horrified at the thought. Though secular, she loved the great mosques of Iran. Barrett was coolly intrigued by the prospect of another entry into the parade of blunders he’d witnessed.

“No, of course not. The target is the Temple Mount in Jerusalem, al Aqsa and the Dome of the Rock. Haven’t you ever listened to the good Reverend Keller?”

The room was silenced by the madness of blowing up the Temple Mount and the violence that would surely ensue. The Middle East would explode, making al Qaeda and ISIL seem like smallish bands of looters. From Morocco to Pakistan to Indonesia, religious passions would ignite and rage uncontrollably. No one can comprehend where it would lead.

“You should talk to the military attaché at the Israeli embassy. They’re more worried about this than anyone.” The colonel noted Barrett’s interest in the suggestion.

“Can you arrange a meeting with him?” Leela was almost pleading.

“Yes, of course. An *Aluf mishne* – a brigadier general.”

Barrett looked up suddenly. “Brigadier General Palashet. Aaron Palashet.” The room looked to him.

“You know the general then.”

“Yep. We knew each other at a think tank, and we were in cahoots on something a few years back.”

The Envoy

Leela and Barrett dined on burritos from a recipe he'd created in New Mexico. Diced sweet potatoes, kidney beans, red peppers, raw onion, and avocado, with a side dish of rice. The dining room overlooked the Potomac. In the distance was Key Bridge and the graceless hi-rises of Roslyn.

"You can stay on as my cook, Barrett. I'll even let you look at my legs, if you're good."

"A tempting offer on both counts, my dear."

Eyes met, only momentarily.

"So what were you and this Israeli general in cahoots about?"

"Back in 2012, when things were getting tense with Iran's nuclear program and airstrikes loomed, we coalesced like-minded people in the American and Israeli national security bureaus, and we were able to slow things down."

"You brought them to a halt, I'd say."

"Only for a while, it seems. The calls for war are sounding once again. *Delenda est Tebran*. Aaron and I were at the Center for World Affairs in Cambridge a few years earlier. That's where we were both exposed to the neoconservative plans for the Middle East, and where we'd expressed our misgivings about its workability, to no avail."

"I was there a few years after you. They were still there. They assumed that I, the daughter of an ex-pat general, would approve all sorts of plans for Iran. They think all Iranian ex-pats are eager to get involved with neocon intrigues. I told them they had no understanding of my country."

She paused before making her move; Barrett noticed and winced.

“So can I tag along when you meet this Israeli general?” She gave him a sad-little-girl look that had served her well for decades. Barrett winced even more. “Please? I promise not to give away your secret plan to short the Persian rug market and reap another obscene windfall.”

“I’ll ask Aaron in an obliquely worded email. It’s his call. He’s the one with an embassy to deal with. Listen, can we watch the news? Things are getting interesting out there.” He pointed outside to the illuminated city and bridges. “The stuff about the Temple Mount is especially interesting, in the Chinese-proverb sense.”

They adjourned to the living room, flicked on the television, and waited for *The News Report* to be replayed at ten. Barrett sent off the email to Aaron’s personal account. His attention was seized by the rug. The evening with Colonel Knadjian had introduced him to a new aspect of life. The rug’s field was an indigo suggestive of a raven’s plumage and the motifs shone like sapphires and rubies meticulously placed along it in majestic symmetry. Bird-like motifs gave a whimsical relief.

“And what style of rug lies before us, Leela? It’s not quite as finely woven as the one in the colonel’s place.”

“An astute description for a desert-dweller. It’s a Khamseh.”

“Someone in your family made this?”

“Well, Persian rugs are named after the town or people they come from. Qom and Isfahan are cities. The Bachtari and Khamseh are peoples. Long ago, the shahs organized five disparate tribes into a warrior confederation to guard the southwestern frontier. Hence the name Khamseh, which means ‘five’. Family lore says the rug before us was woven by an ancestor and presented to my grandparents on the occasion of their wedding.”

“The shahs did the same with the Pashtuns in what’s now Afghanistan and Pakistan. Disparate groups pressed together for defense.”

Leela turned up the volume as the program began.

The National Association of Urban Leaders held its annual convention in Detroit today and to the surprise of few, the influential group threw its support behind Valerie Roberts. This isn’t expected to affect the electoral college race as major cities are only rarely in highly-contested states. Turnout, though, may be critical for congressional seats and local offices, and thus far interest in the

election remains only lukewarm. This is the case despite heated arguments from both parties about this election being the most important one in a 150 years.

“Mayor Bialek of Chicago has openly stated his mistrust of Walton Hillock: ‘Hillock is too close to the fringe right and he’s sure to get us involved in more wars over oil. I say we have problems right here at home. Right here in our cities. People can’t find work and their kids are hungry.’

Bialek is shown standing before a row of microphones. Behind him are several aids who dutifully nod in agreement with his every word and motion for the crowd to applaud spontaneously.

The anchor continued.

“In Washington, a gathering of the nation’s governors took an unexpected turn when two of them imposed a moratorium on debt collection and foreclosures of homes and farms. Governor Sanderson of Oklahoma quoted a Depression-Era governor who told the people of his state to shoot any banker who tried to foreclose on their property. Word came later today of shots fired at a sheriff trying to serve a foreclosure notice in Okemeh, Oklahoma, and judges in several states are thought to be declaring moratoria of their own.

“The National Association of Urban Leaders will discuss the growing moratorium movement tomorrow. Walton Hillock has criticized the movement as a threat to the principle of law and order and has promised a firm response once he takes office.

“Governors and mayors responded by saying that in the event of a Hillock win – which they insist is unlikely – they would look into strengthening local governments and seceding from the Union. This is a remarkable turnaround from, or natural response to, similar threats of secession by states supportive of Walton Hillock.

“Several corporations, including at least four from the Dow-Jones index announced that they are looking into relocating their headquarters to the Bahamas and Luxembourg. Spokespersons cite the deteriorating political situation and growing violence as the main reasons.

“Many Americans are wondering where the campaign is heading and what it portends for our nation. Nonetheless, polling data do not show an increase in interest for the election, which is only weeks away now. Indeed, some analysts say the increased polarization and antagonism are making potential voters uneasy about the entire political system and causing them to withdraw from

civic duty. Some voters say that only a strong leader will be able to hold the country together.”

Leela and Barrett shut off the TV and sat silently in the living room. Barrett looked out the window to Key Bridge.

“Leela, my dear, this town is going to become a very troubled place. Baghdad on the Potomac. What’s in store for us? Nothin’ good. Maybe we should go back to teaching college.”

A swift reply came in the form of a skeptical look. They both had had enough of pretentious students, scheming colleagues, and readerless publications. She had had enough of advances from unattractive and unfit men with offices down the hall and positions on tenure committees.

“Or we can live out in the desert, far from this town and the hell that is going to descend upon it.”

Her look became one of puzzlement, then unexpected reflection.

Law and order amid the campaign

Opposition to foreclosures skyrocketed after the Oklahoma governor spoke of using force to defend property. Homeowners and farm owners from coast to coast held meetings and stood together outside properties where local sheriffs were expected to serve papers and move belongings to the curb. In open-carry states, where it's legal to hold a rifle or pistol in such situations, as long as it's in plain sight and not brandished, many people exercised that right – as well as the right to stern countenances. They never had before, they never would again in all likelihood.

In fending off formally legal but in their view substantively unjust seizures of property, many people held their weapons as sheriffs got out of their cars. The effect was sobering. Even if the weapon was an old shotgun used for duck hunting long ago or a Colt Dragoon that an ancestor hefted at Shiloh, the sheriffs were taken aback. In almost all cases law enforcement officials stated their purpose and its legality, spoke in a respectful and engaging manner with the gathering, and called in the situation to superiors, who instructed them to read the court orders then to leave without further ado. People cheered as the sheriffs drove off. Then they hopped in their cars and trucks and followed the sheriffs to the next home or farm.

Nothing was getting done. Banks and mortgage companies were livid. The rule of law was breaking down and cash flow was down. They looked into getting help from the national guard but governors would only promise to take action once things had cooled off.

Things weren't cooling off, though. ANN reported that there was an average of four shootings a day across the country and most people thought it was only a matter of time before events worsened.

A sheriff in Fordyce, Arkansas was shot as he drove down a rural road on his way to serve papers on a cotton farm two miles out of town. He was reportedly flagged down by a motorist with his hood up then shot several times. No empty shells were found, so

it was probably a revolver. The sheriff died of his wounds the next day. Police worked tirelessly to find the killer but remained mindful of tensions.

Bureau of Land Management officials found themselves barred from entering several properties in Nevada and Montana. Men armed with shotguns and AR-15s stood at gates and refused to step aside. When the BLM officials stated their purpose, they were met with silent stares. Some heard the sound of safeties being switched off and rounds being chambered in back rows.

Police in a county near Elko set up roadblocks along roads coming into it. Federal officials and state troopers were stopped and ordered to stay out. They called it in, then turned around.

With the anti-foreclosure sentiment so strong, prosecuting attorneys wondered if they'd be able to get convictions, no matter how strong the case. The idea of "nullification by jury," whereby citizens refuse to convict someone they know to have broken the law, energized the anti-foreclosure movement. It was on their websites and Facebook pages. Some of the posts were written by lawyers and professors, who cited laws and precedents.

The anti-foreclosure movement wasn't confined to rural areas and suburbs. It was rife in many cities as well, where law enforcement was already widely mistrusted and even hated. This went back to the many years of "stop and frisk" programs that had targeted minorities. After an incident involving a police officer shooting and killing a young minority man accused of trying to break into a car, members of the community gathered together and set up obstacles to keep police cruisers out. On larger streets, tires were set afire, sending dark plumes into the air and sending a menacing signal to authorities.

Mayors expressed sympathy for community members and vowed to band together with other mayors to coordinate their responses and discuss a confederation of independent cities that would break away from the United States, depending on the outcome of the election. Some claimed these self-governing bodies are the natural outcome of police officers' growing reluctance to respond to calls from inner cities, which began after controversial police shootings in recent years.

Several governors met to discuss the legal groundwork for, and practical considerations of, seceding from the union – taxes, tolls, voting, and the like. Some organizations had already looked into the matter and the related one of establishing the right of state legislatures to veto decisions made by the US Supreme Court that they held to be in violation of constitutional principles and the expressed will of the people of their states. Heretofore national issues of gun control and abortion and school

prayer would become *state* issues, with Supreme Court decisions being non-binding opinions.

The Roberts campaign addressed the deteriorating situation by calling for calm and promising that if elected, her first order of business would be to pass legislation to make home and farm ownership secure and a “basic right of all Americans.” This had a calming effect, though only a small one. People were establishing rights in their own ways.

Hillock too called for calm and promised relief once he became president. He reminded Americans that above all else we were a nation of laws where individuals must not take the law into their own hands. He’d seen it firsthand in Afghanistan and Iraq and saw it spreading into other parts of the world.

He then transitioned into his reform program. In order to reduce wastefulness, the national guards of all fifty states would be placed under the guidance of the federal government. Police departments would enjoy far greater support from Washington. Local law enforcement would continue to benefit from the timely distribution of tactical weaponry and from greater training by active duty troops.

This would greatly streamline the sharing of intelligence, training programs, and counterterrorism operations. Hillock even envisioned deploying domestic police units, especially their tactical teams and SWAT units, to trouble spots such as Iraq, Afghanistan, and Latvia, where they’d learn invaluable lessons they may have to apply back home one day. Many Americans found his response encouraging and inspiring.

A pretty calf is like a Melody

After a late start, Leela and Barrett drove up Connecticut Ave shortly after noon. Traffic was never good inside the District and that day was no exception. Stop after stop along a broad boulevard with supposedly synchronized lights. They turned on Windom Place and found a spot two blocks in.

“There’s no such establishment,” Leela protested. “You made the name up and you’re luring me to some strange place in upper Northwest. No one would name a place that way. It’s not French. It’s not English. It’s not anything. *La Gaucherie* would be a better name.”

“Agreed. Nevertheless, I’m afraid I’m not making the name up. *Il existe. Je te jure, ma cherie*. That’s where Aaron said to meet him. I’m just glad it isn’t a Vietnamese place. Oh, and this man knew your father from something called Project Flower – a joint effort by Israel and Iran to build a medium-range missile.”

“Small world, that Middle East.”

“Lots of strange bedfellows too – from time to time.”

“I’ve seen stranger ones. Here . . . Chicago. . . .”

When Barrett tried to take care of the parking meter, he was baffled by the absence of a coin slot. The meter insisted on being compensated by means of a cell phone. Seeing his confusion, Leela took care of it with a few motions on her iPhone.

She treasured his bewilderment.

“New-fangled eastern ways, pardner.”

“We don’t have parking meters where I live, *pardner*.”

“Just a livery stable for your horse.”

“And my wolf. Don’t forget Jesse.”

“Never.”

They walked a block south and entered an establishment called *La Cheeserie*. Barrett assumed a “told ya so” look and let it go at that. There waiting, in a tan sport coat and navy slacks, was Brigadier General Aaron Palashet. Just shy of six-feet tall, wiry, and topped with a bullet-shaped head that was two or three days past its most recent shaving. A hard-nosed Sabra, Aaron was an unmistakable descendant of the people who settled Palestine in the thirties, fought its wars, and brought it prosperity – and as close as it can get to security.

He had the look of a calculating national-security officer, even a Mossad assassin, but an occasional warmth spread across his face forming ripples in the taut skin. He and Barrett knew each other from the Center for World Affairs and had downed a few Guinneses at the Plough and Stars pub in Cambridge while they talked about the fragility of Middle Eastern states.

Aaron greeted with a quick wave and held up a bag of croissants and bottled water and suggested they chat in a park behind the place.

“I was a shavetail lieutenant on Moshe Dayan’s staff when we traveled to Iran. When was it? About 1976, I’d estimate. Your father was on General Toufanian’s staff, as I recall.” A glimmer of recognition came to Leela when she heard the name of Hassan Toufanian, the shah’s chief arms purchaser. “We were to help your country with its missile program. Little came of it. Times changed. I hope they change again for us.”

“There’s always that hope,” Leela replied with an agreeable look, but she could not forget the plans she knew of, or their provenance.

Aaron handed out napkins, croissants, and beverages before getting down to cases. “The origin of the croissant, I hope you know, is not what it is often said to be, Leela.”

“I know the old story of its being a celebration of a victory over the Ottomans. Not true.”

“Then we can enjoy them on this lovely fall day.”

Aaron’s demeanor became somber. “Keller . . . Keller.” Previously unseen furrows made themselves plain on his ample forehead. “Some things are simply too convoluted

and nonsensical to discuss in brief. Time, however, is pressing.” He gathered his thoughts, searched for a starting point and wondering if he’d come across as convincing or paranoid or worse. “Keller has been cause of great concern to *Shin Bet*, our domestic intelligence service. He’s been in touch with splinter groups in our religious right who want to blow up the al Aqsa Mosque. One such group tried to accomplish this thirty years ago. Thankfully, Shin Bet found them out and stopped them. There aren’t many of them. They’ll try again, though. They have certainty and determination and a peculiar form of faith.”

“I hope your Shin Bet stops them again. This al Aqsa thing is tied in with their view of the end of the world, isn’t it?” Leela had done some homework. Barrett knew the pieces and wanted to see them put together, preferably in a less troubling way than he was doing. Aaron was not obliging him; realities did not allow it.

“Yes, it is. Very much so. The destruction of al Aqsa will trigger the final battle between the forces of light and darkness. This will lead to the coming of the Messiah or the return of Jesus, depending on one’s beliefs. Or to a mass slaughter and chaos throughout the Middle East, if one is less theological and more practical in outlook. Shin Bet, Mossad, and most Israelis see it as leading to slaughter and chaos. We guard the place very carefully. I don’t think the fringe can get to it, or dig a tunnel under it to place a mine.”

“And Keller and his flock want to see the Temple Mount in ruins,” Barrett added in lingering puzzlement.

“Yes. So do al Qaeda and ISIL.” Aaron was embarrassed that he smiled, however faintly. “They too believe in the final battle between good and evil, though in their minds the sides are inverted. They have what we might call a ‘phoenix rising out of the ashes’ belief. The ashes are a devastated Middle East –”

“And the phoenix is their new caliphate!” Barrett’s exclamation was contained in a solemn whisper.

Leela reflected on how alien all this was from the simple piety she’d learned growing up in Iran and America. “Is there any cooperation among the splinter groups and Islamist militants?”

Aaron shrugged his shoulders and held his hands out in exasperation. “I doubt it, but who knows . . . who knows. In the shadows, many groups collaborate whether they know it or not. The Middle East has had so many false flags planted on its soil that they stretch from Algiers to Baghdad. They don’t know who everyone they work with

is, but if they have money and explosives and flames in their hearts . . . they can work together. Until they don't, and then they turn on each other."

"What will set things off?"

Leela's question struck Aaron as leading and suggestive she had more than an inkling of the answer. "Keller has a ranch near Lubbock."

"Muleshoe, Texas. I've been there."

"The very place. Did you see any cattle roaming about his ranch?"

"Yes, quite a few yet not enough to constitute a working ranch. They were mostly young. Far more calves than cows and bulls. He had photographs of a few of the calves in his office."

"And do you recall their coloring?"

"Mostly reddish brown. More red, I'd say."

"Yes. That's the sign – a pure red calf! Female to be precise. A pure red heifer. It's tied in with purification rituals in Scripture that must be performed before entering the new temple. One such heifer was born in Galilee fifteen years ago. Her name was Melody. Well, she had the believers ready to strike the Temple Mount." Aaron shook his head wearily. "She looked like a sweet little cow to me, not a sign of the apocalypse."

"Shin Bet stopped them?" Barrett offered, his mind still assembling jagged, odd-shaped pieces.

"No. Melody stopped them. She was kind enough to sprout a few white hairs, despoiling her purity, and disqualifying her from being the sign. The disappointment in certain quarters of both our countries was, shall we say, keen. It was like learning that Miss America had been a call girl. Nonetheless, hope springs infernal. Keller's donors have given him millions and he has hired experts in animal husbandry and genetics. That will be the sign for the faithful – of all three faiths – to strike the Temple Mount."

"And blow it up?"

"Yes, Barrett. And blow it up."

"O ye of too much faith."

Barrett and Leela were dumbfounded. Was Aaron having sport with them? Performing a disinformation ploy? As bizarre as Aaron's account was, it dovetailed unsettlingly well with Keller's imagery-laden words, cherubic face, and glazed eyes that offered no prospect of doubt or restraint.

"So, let me run this down for my own good, Aaron." Barrett was juggling too much to articulate what was just beginning to gel in his mind. "Keller is . . ."

All three of them finished the sentence.

". . . breeding *the pure red heifer*."

"The pure red heifer that will cause World War Three." Barrett was stunned. The biggest blunder in history was unfolding before him. He envisioned tens of thousands of American troops heading for the Middle East, swarms of Valkyries not far behind them.

Leela put down the remnant of her croissant. "What about General Hillock? Is he a true believer or does he see Keller as a lunatic who can help him get elected before being cast aside."

"That's subject to debate within Shin Bet and Mossad. The consensus is that, though Keller is in league with a handful of generals, especially in your air force, Hillock is *not* a true believer, at least not in the sense of wanting to destroy al Aqsa and bring the end times. They point to Hillock's commitment to a New Cold War and to far-reaching changes in American government. If the end is nigh, those things have no more significance than mowing the lawn or clipping coupons.

"Nevertheless, if you will entertain a humble general's opinion, which I believe extends at least somewhat past idle speculation, we cannot dismiss the possibility that he is simpatico with Keller. Popular adulation may have brought a sense of destiny and divine favor. The Romans had someone to stand behind a triumphant general and caution him that fame is fleeting. America has a fawning media and a lethargic public. In any event, his political ascendance is interpreted by the true believers as a sign, and they may act independently of him."

"Aaron, do your organizations have information on them?"

"We have a good deal of information on Keller and Hillock. Hundreds of pages and scores of photos. Alas, diplomatic rules being what they are, I cannot tell you that information. My government would never tolerate such a thing."

Aaron removed a thumb drive from his pocket and without losing eye contact, casually nudged it over to Barrett's napkin and croissant, before continuing.

"A religion that sees itself besieged by wickedness – secular forces, rock stars and movie stars, self-indulgence, ambiguity, moral complexity, and other things attendant to the modern world – will retreat into its own realm of self-evident truths, righteousness, virtue, and absolute certainty. And the curse the religion has for the outside world becomes the conviction that it will soon be immolated in a supreme act of horror which will validate the faithful's isolation and aberrance."

"Aaron! You missed your calling as a philosopher." Barrett had greater admiration for his colleague.

"A little Mencken in there, I suspect. I read him in college back in Tel Aviv." He shrugged his shoulders and smiled warmly. "My mother wanted me to be a rabbi. 'My son the general' is heard too often back home."

Something occurred to Leela.

"Keller has a picture in his office of him and Hillock. They are standing together with thoughtful looks on their faces. Determined . . . solemn. I think they were in Jerusalem."

"I *know* that photograph, Leela." He looked down at the flash drive lying in Barrett's hand. "It's there. You may come across it again. They were holding palm leaves."

Leela nodded.

"That wasn't Jerusalem. That was Megiddo, a town not far from Haifa." A look of worry came across his Sabra face, more so than earlier. "In English it's known as Armageddon. That's where . . . ah, you know."

Dzhokbar, Russia

Three men doze in their seats on a passenger train heading north from Baku along the shoreline of the Caspian. The ride was hardly smooth but they are not used to any comforts at all. The train rolls from side to side and makes disconcerting clanging noises that initially startle them.

One of them wakes in panic as an oncoming train rushes noisily by. He saw the blade of an immense, glistening scythe swooping down on him, and bolted upright, stifling a scream then gasping for breath. His two friends know what had flashed through his mind and they ease his consternation, consolingly, then with comradely humor. They soon all nod off again.

Fellow passengers think little of it. They judge them as just another group of anxious Chechens returning from seasonal work in the south. Perhaps dangerous work in the oilfields around Baku where the pay is attractive and grave injury common.

The three had made their way into Azerbaijan from Syria. They were once soldiers in the al Nusrah Front – an al Qaeda affiliate fighting the government of Bashar al-Assad. They were *supposed* to be fighting the Assad government. However, they were fighting other rebel groups as much as they were fighting Assad.

They were also fighting against a group that was once allied with al Nusrah and al Qaeda – the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant. ISIL developed from the Sunni opposition to the US invasion of Iraq then swept into Syria and northern Iraq, establishing itself as the most feared Islamist group from Morocco to Afghanistan. The old men running al Qaeda from hideouts in Pakistan could not match their audacity and accomplishments, and they disowned ISIL in 2014 – to little avail. Some al Nusrah fighters deserted and went over to fight in ISIL units. Not so the three Chechens on the train from Baku to Grozny that day.

Two weeks earlier, they entered a village that ISIL had abandoned after an American airstrike pounded its makeshift headquarters and training center. Before leaving, ISIL fighters slaughtered over fifty villagers. Some women, some small children. The headless corpses of a dozen men, signs of torture clear, were crucified in a park around a dry, broken fountain from the Ottoman era. Notes reading “I died slowly” were nailed into the silent heads at their feet. Expressions of bottomless despair were frozen on their faces, for eternity.

The men were all that was left of a group of ten Chechens that had eagerly come south in 2012, in part to repay al Qaeda for the Arab fighters it sent to help against Russia in the nineties, in part out of a boyish yen for adventure in war. Four of them were dead. Three were wounded and presumably being treated somewhere. The boyish yen was gone.

Hardened though they were, they still couldn't help staring in mute horror at the grim exhibition in the park that day. One knelt down – not to pray, but to steady himself. They were surprised they still had that capacity for empathy for anyone outside their fighting unit. They'd been given a glimpse into the abyss, and stepped back. The men no longer saw the war in Syria related to defending their faith or establishing a caliphate. It had become an apocalyptic nightmare. Their units had become death cults and the people of Syria had become burnt offerings to angry, insatiable gods.

They slipped away from camp one night and broke into deserted houses and stole jewelry, silver curios, and anything else compact and valuable that civilians had left behind before they fled. It didn't add up to much though. Enough to get into Turkey, not much farther. They happened upon a root cellar containing a small arms cache that ISIL left behind in their hasty retreat. They found a Chinese FN-6. The handheld anti-aircraft missile would be useful back home. Or it would fetch a good price from other rebel bands.

They made it to the Turkish border and sold their Kalashnikovs to incoming fighters, telling the breathless youths how well the war was going and how much they admired their faith and courage. They felt only a little guilt. Lies about the glory of war had been spreading for centuries – since Saladin, at least. A few more lies wouldn't amount to anything. Nor, for that matter, would their warnings have amounted to anything, no matter how dreadful and detailed they might be. The youths would have scorned the men as unmanly or lacking in faith. Boys love war and yearn for one of their own someday. Some are unfortunate enough to get one. Fate had not refused these three Chechens – nor the youths they saw on the Turkish border that day.

There was reason to bring the FN-6 into Russia, but it was too risky. They sold it for fifteen hundred dollars – a princely sum to them – and with some of it, they bought a cell phone to call family members in Chechnya. No mention of names or where they'd

been; the Russian Interior Ministry or FSB might be listening in. The voices of loved ones brought back fond though faint memories that had become almost indistinguishable from characters in stories they'd read in their boyhoods. One man wept after speaking with his mother.

Hitchhiking and walking and bribing truckers, they made their way across southeastern Turkey then into Armenia and Azerbaijan. They trimmed their rough beards and donned clean attire, as they knew Russian border guards would be watchful for returning jihadis. In Baku, they purchased rail tickets to the Chechen capital of Grozny. They called the city "Dzhokhar" – the name the city assumed during an unsuccessful uprising against Russia.

As the train speeds north in the evening hours, they look to the west and see an occasional glint of the reddish-yellow sun glancing off the steel of the Baku-Novorossiysk pipeline. It runs from old but still operational wells that the Rothschilds and Nobels had begun over a century earlier, when oil was only beginning to surpass coal as the choice of energy for the warships of Britain, Russia, and other world powers.

In Grozny they meet with loved ones and old comrades. They feel strangely distant from the former. Some of the latter had been in Syria and Iraq and even eastern Afghanistan. They too were disillusioned with radical Islam and they too were determined to fight for something more practical, something they believed attainable. They abandoned the cause of Islamist internationalism and were taking up the cause of Chechen independence.

Putin was calling for self-determination for Crimeans and for inhabitants of the Donbas in the eastern Ukraine. Why was he not equally supportive of Chechen self-determination? They knew why. They'd seen the reason as they peered to the west from the train. The Baku-Novorossiysk pipeline ran through Chechnya before turning west to the Black Sea terminus. Oil was the only thing holding Russia up.

The men were going to hit the pipeline in repeated strikes and attack Russian troops in the small garrisons defending it. Putin had his best troops elsewhere, leaving the pipeline in the hands of fresh conscripts and NCOs at the end of their careers. The attacks would spark a revolt in Chechnya and in neighboring Dagestan.

Everyone knew what had happened the last time Chechnya challenged Moscow's rule. Grozny was subjected to weeks of intense artillery fire that reduced it to smoldering rubble. Stray dogs crept down empty streets seeking something to eat. Elderly men who'd served in the Red Army against Hitler said that Grozny was more devastated than Stalingrad was.

The men were convinced this wouldn't happen again. They'd listened to radio broadcasts while in Syria and bought newspapers in Baku train stations. They were certain they'd receive money and arms and support from powerful outsiders. The flame of Islamist glory was gone from their souls, but another flame was coming to life and giving them hope. A few words in newspaper, an inspiring picture, and the need to fend off complete despair made them believe that they'd receive help in their insurrection.

There was a man who promised to stand up to Russia. The al Nusrah commanders in Syria knew a little about this man. In conjunction with the mullahs they integrated him into their eschatology. A mullah spoke to the Chechens the night before they saw the aftermath of the massacre in the park. An American would try to destroy the al Aqsa mosque and the Dome of the Rock and set off the final war between Christianity and Islam – a war the jihadis were certain to win. They would then reconquer lost empires and retake Jerusalem, or “Quds” as they called it. Then the Mahdi would come and the end times would be at hand.

The three Chechens had been disabused of millenarian nonsense about caliphates and Mahdis. And they had a different view of this great man overseas. He was a pompous, arrogant American, but he would help them with arms and money and green beret advisers when he became president of the United States. First, they had to demonstrate their resoluteness.

They locked and loaded their Kalashnikovs, inspected their RPG-18s one more time, and headed for the mist-shrouded hills that overlooked the Baku-Novorossiysk pipeline and an isolated encampment of Russian conscripts charged with guarding it. The Chechens wanted to impress upon America that they were formidable warriors and relentless enemies of Russia. Then General Walton Ambrose Hillock would help them fight the Russians.

The Envoy, II

“Is that a Khamseh or a Qashqai?” Anthony gazed fondly at the rug in Leela’s living room where the three gathered. “Perhaps a stupid question to ask of someone named Leela Khamseh.”

“No, not a stupid question at all. Yes, it’s a Khamseh. My grandfather came from the Five Tribes as a boy in the thirties and became a cadet in the Iranian army. Barrett, you should take rug lessons from our colleague here. A little refinement doesn’t hurt.”

“I wear Luccheses. What more refinement is there?”

“Hopeless!”

With everyone seated, they turned to the business at hand. Barrett and Leela had pored over the material on the thumb drive for the last two days and decided to bring in the only other trustworthy person in the Project. They had no idea who else to apprise; who would believe them? At times they themselves thought they were letting personal views shape interpretations of hazy events and allusive words. Now, both Shin Bet and Mossad had come to many of the same views.

They gave Anthony a thumb drive with the same material the previous morning. No one emailed the material or discussed it in any detail. Cell phone discussions were agreed to be out of bounds.

“Tell me where you got all this. You were rather brief when you gave it to me. Understandably so.”

“Someone from Israeli intelligence, *dai uy*. Someone I’ve known for quite some time, and I trust.”

“But how do we know that we aren’t being used by Mossad or Shin Bet for their own reasons? Maybe they don’t like Hillock and want him to fail.”

Leela took it on.

“Plausible. We’ve thought of that. From a national security position, it’s Valerie Roberts who would be suspect in those quarters. Hillock is a religious man, career military, and a former Centcom commander. IDF and Centcom work together. Not without disagreements now and then, but they’re on excellent terms.”

“That’s true, that’s true.” Anthony nodded after hearing what he’d already arrived at. And though doubt remained, he went on. “Okay, there are three major things in the cache. First, the Iranian operation. The Project was important in developing it, as we all know. We were all at the meeting with those guys. The plan is foolish, it’s not going to work. Is it unconstitutional? Who knows.”

“The cache contains a section on the Project’s running it past some con law people at Yale and Penn.” Barrett spoke matter-of-factly. “They didn’t see any constitutional or political obstacles. Congress will stay on the sidelines. As for the public, they’ll do nothing. A few protests here and there, as before. Most of them have no relatives in the military. Wars and television miniseries are blurred in their minds and have the same negligible meaning in their lives. Or so they think.”

Leela was annoyed. “Barrett, please spare us your bring-back-the-draft tirade. You and Anthony can hash that one out at a VFW bar someday.”

Barrett leaned back, equally annoyed, but he didn’t want the meeting to end badly.

Leela continued.

“We all seem to agree that neither the public nor congress will oppose the Iran policy, especially if endorsed by a popular general. US casualties? There would be risks for pilots, but most of the ordnance will be the stand-off kind – released from many miles away, maybe even outside Iranian airspace. Special forces teams operating with the Kurds, Balochs, and Azeris will face greater risks. As will the Jedburgh teams.”

Neither Barrett nor Anthony knew of those teams. Leela relished the moment.

“The Jedburghs – named after the commando strikes in Nazi-occupied Europe – are tasked with demolishing key sites inside Iran. If I may presage that you’re wondering of the targets, the answer is not simply the uranium-enrichment centers and the Arak plutonium site. Someone already demolished the Parchin site.”

The pause was unpleasant.

“Yeah, well they also say I shot Liberty Valance and that I was on the grassy knoll in Dallas. I have an alibi for all of them, including Parchin. But that’s another one for the VFW Lodge, I suppose. What are the other sites?”

“I’ll print the legend, Anthony. The other sites are not military or related to the nuclear program. They are mosques.” Leela saw more confounded looks. “The explosions will be blamed on Sunnis operating in concert with Saudi intelligence, thereby worsening tensions and perhaps leading to full war between the sectarian enemies.”

“Saudi Arabia is no match for Iran, you guys.”

“Sooooo, *dai uy*, someone will have to intervene on behalf of the army of Saudi princes and playboys – the US.”

The silence lasted a half minute at least as each pondered the ramifications of the uprisings inside Iran and a war between the two Gulf powers. Anthony leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees.

“This was discussed in the Agency over the last few years. False flag ops. But why is Mossad warning us of this? A crumbling Middle East is hardly at odds with Israeli security interests. Many of their enemies have crumbled into warring statelets that could never endanger Israel.”

The same thought had run through Barrett’s head for the last two days. “Maybe Mossad judges that too much chaos in the region will lead to unpredictable things down the road – reaping the whirlwind. That’s from the Book of Hosea. Mossad, it seems, is at odds with its own government on this one.”

“Or perhaps only your source is at odds with a government or two.” The other two nodded in agreement with Anthony. “Let’s go on to the second main point. Hillock over the years has placed protégés in key positions. Before getting his fourth star and Centcom, he oversaw the Command and General Staff School in Kansas and set up a Leadership Institute to groom future generals. Selectees were based less on Pentagon policies than on Hillock’s discretion. Mossad believes that every divisional commander and every brigade commander has been handpicked by Hillock and is grateful and trustful and obedient.”

“Yes, but this isn't unusual or alarming,” Anthony immediately countered. “George Marshall did much the same in anticipation of the outbreak of World War Two when he appointed generals from his notebook. He didn’t appoint lackeys; he appointed energetic, creative officers. No one accused Marshall of organizing a coup.”

“However, the same is true of the commanders of almost all national guard and reserve divisions,” Leela added as she looked to her notes. “And three of the private security firms that have been so much in the news are headed by Hillock protégés. One of them is scheduled to assume security on Capitol Hill early next year.”

Barrett picked up the narrative. “There’s a document in the cache. A letter Hillock wrote to divisional and brigade commanders just before he resigned from the army last summer. We’ve all seen the letter: duty to the country . . . exceptional circumstances . . . emergency powers . . . decisive action.”

“Let me note some parallels with the Project’s thinking here.” Leela looked to her clipboard. “We had a meeting with some people who would likely run the Federal Reserve Board and Treasury Department in a Hillock administration and the expression ‘decisive action’ was used in regard to controlling the debt. Woolfolk enunciated the words exceptionally clearly as though they’d be recognized by some in the room. I think they did just that, but I wasn’t in on it.”

“You are now.” Barrett’s hand was alternately opening and closing.

“You too, Barrett. All of us. The other thing is a few questions in some polling the Project commissioned. ‘Would you favor decisive action to stop wasteful government spending and get the economy back on its feet?’ and ‘Would you support decisive action to protect our national security?’ The favorable responses have increased fifteen percent in the last two months. They’re especially high in Hillock supporters but independents are jumping on too. The Hillock campaign has been running spots throughout the country with a picture of Hillock, in uniform, with the words ‘Walton Hillock – a man who acts decisively’.”

“What about the responses to Hillock’s missive to his legion commanders?” Barrett’s growing ire was apparent. Leela patted his hand, more of a scold than an assurance. “Four division commanders and twelve brigade commanders stated they stood behind him and were ‘prepared to act decisively for the nation’. A couple dozen said they’d respond by courier. No one rebuffed him. No one asked for clarification.”

“It would seem, gentlemen, that they all knew what he was talking about. Let’s go on to the third issue – the mosque. All yours, Anthony.”

“We’ve been given transcripts of phone conversations between Hillock and Reverend Keller speaking hopefully if not confidently of the demolition of al Aqsa and the entire Temple Mount. Perhaps I should say they spoke *rapturously* of the event. Hillock questions the strength of the Muslim response and cites the relative dearth of reaction

when US troops entered mosques in Baghdad, Ramadi, and Fallujah. Keller chides him for his lack of faith and Hillock defers to him, or seems to.”

“And there were transcripts of five division commanders supporting the demolition. Two expressed their hope that this will be done.” Barrett calmed himself after a reproveful glance from Leela. “Okay, there’s also mention of how a single B-2 Spirit bomber with two bunker-busters could do – what was it the phrase, ‘perform a miracle’.”

Anthony leaned back and sighed, folding his hands behind his back. “There were people like that in the army. Officers and NCOs. Walk through the CIA parking lot someday and look at all the ‘The Day Is Coming – Soon’ bumper stickers. Keller’s motto.”

“Our motto – Apocalypse Now.” Puzzled eyes turned to him. “It’s in the movie. On the wall near the river in Brando’s compound.” Leela and Anthony’s eyes became somewhat less puzzled. “Anyway, if Mossad and Shin Bet worry about this, so should we. Speaking of which, anyone wonder where those outfits got all this intel?”

“I have.” Leela spoke like a bright student daring to answer a stern teacher’s question, lightening the atmosphere a bit. “I suspect that they got it from the NSA.”

“You think NSA gave them this stuff?”

“No, Anthony. I think Mossad *took* it from them. NSA stole it from the American people, and Mossad stole it from NSA.”

“Whatever happened to the right of privacy?” Anthony hardly expected an answer, but Barrett offered one anyway.

“Americans gave it up years ago. The internet, credit card companies, game shows. The NSA was a latecomer to the process, though it had the most gear. Americans don’t care much for their rights these days anyway.”

Leela exhaled in annoyance. “Another lecture. By the by, I have another odd polling question we’ve been asking. It’s . . . well, just listen. ‘Do you believe America has a providential mission to play in history?’ ”

She didn’t need to run down the demographics of the respondents, pro and con.

“Maybe we should go see this Keller fellow.” Barrett looked at the ceiling imagining one of the reverend’s gatherings. Again, it was a barbecued calf with Hank Williams,

Jr playing in a gazebo. A steer . . . or an imperfect heifer and the occasion served to thin the herd of disappointing beef.

“We don’t have the time to go to Muleshoe, Texas.”

“We don’t have to. Muleshoe is coming to us.”

This time, Barrett enjoyed their looks of puzzlement.

The president's office

“Idiot!”

Kulikov cuffed the young lieutenant as they drove to the neoclassical Senate Building hidden behind the imposing walls of the Kremlin. Lt Dimitri Rublev's cap fell onto his epauletted shoulder then onto his lap. Rublev put it back on his head and stared ahead in restrained anger at the action of a man he considered a talentless apparatchik in a new and artless regime.

“You are paid to keep watch on Mother Russia's enemies, not on the mergers and acquisitions of American investment bankers.”

“I can do both without sacrificing Mother Russia's security. What I do after hours should not be the state's concern.” Rublev slumped in the backseat of the foreign ministry's limousine as it sped down Vozdvizhenka Street. His uniform was ill-tailored and his service cap too big but he had a decent haircut, at least by the standards of the Russian army.

“Brad Pitt's personal life and the inner communications of Sony Pictures are none of your concern either! National security, you idiot! National security, not your prurient curiosity and personal wealth.”

Rublev braced for another clout but none came. Kulikov and Rublev entered the Senate and were escorted to Putin's office, where the chief of staff let them in immediately. Rublev stiffened and saluted, though he wasn't sure of protocol. Putin returned the salute and bade them to sit at table in front of his desk.

“You are the young man who has gotten into the NSA servers and brought his motherland a bounteous trove of data. I have little understanding of the internet myself. It is good to know I have resourceful young men like you at my disposal.”

“I was commending Lt Rublev myself as we drove to the Kremlin, Mr President. A great resource for us. I quite agree.”

“Indeed, he was, sir. He patted me on the head only minutes ago.” Rublev added as much sarcasm as he dared. “We at the Kaliningrad site know our work is deeply appreciated by the leadership in Moscow.”

“Lt Rublev here got into the NSA files and also those of a secretive organization that is backing Hillock. It is called the Project for a New American Democracy.”

“This Hillock fellow . . .” Putin moved his head back and forth, disdain clear. “Stalin would have had him shot. There were many he *did* have shot, in a forest not far from where we are right now. They were told to take a leisurely walk and at some point, Artur Artuzov would shoot them from some distance with a service rifle. I have his rifle in my personal collection.”

Kulikov noted Marshall Stalin’s portrait just behind the president.

“Nonetheless, I find him an interesting fellow. Far too ambitious but we can use this against him. Tell me of this al Aqsa plan. It is baffling. Monumentally stupid too.”

Kulikov replied immediately.

“Hillock – or some people in his clique of reactionaries – wish to blow up the al Aqsa mosque in order to start an immense war in the Middle East. It’s tied in to the expectations of the religious right in America.”

“Religion is the crystal meth of the masses . . . if I may take liberties with an old expression.” Rublev raised his chin, proud of his wit at such an auspicious and tense moment.

Putin and Kulikov looked in astonishment at him. Kulikov looked to Putin for a hint as to what he should do. Slap him again?

“A young man with computer skills and a sharp wit. We are fortunate, are we not, Kulikov?”

“Yes, we are, sir. Very fortunate.” Putin motioned for Kulikov to continue.” This crystal-meth-induced plan for al Aqsa might not cause the final battle as the faithful think, but it will bring war – and that will raise the sagging price of oil, perhaps quite sharply. That will be good for our arms sales to the region and of course for our economy as a whole.”

“Hillock also has plans to invade Iran, with the help of the Kurds. Does he not, Kulikov?”

“Yes, but that will go badly. The Revolutionary Guards have thousands of devoted men in their *Basij* militias. They are poorly trained and rather dim-witted, but they will fight ceaselessly. The Iranians will chew up the invaders and spit them out – with our advice and with our weaponry. Russia and Iran will be all the closer. His plans for a new cold war to rally his divided nation and prop up the failing economy will help us too. Russia will make the transition from a quasi-democracy to what it always has been, an autocracy.”

Kulikov was unsettled by Putin’s glib disregard for the problems posed by Hillock. He searched for a way to convey this without incurring his wrath. No opening presented itself.

Kulikov was aghast when Rublev began to speak again.

“May I be so bold as to suggest that a Hillock presidency – that is, a military coup in the US – would present certain challenges and difficulties for the Russian people?”

Putin looked at the young computer expert with amused interest. He leaned back in his chair and folded his arms in mock interest.

“Please, Rublev. Please be so good as to enlighten your president in the ways of the world.”

Rublev was unsure if Putin was mocking him or truly interested. He nonetheless proceeded.

“Let us look for a moment at American democracy. It has paralyzed the state and brought it to the edge of fiscal collapse. The parties devote their energies to attacking one another and not to tending to world affairs. Surely, such a decrepit government will continue to stumble about in world affairs. Meanwhile, Russia is led by a cunning man at the helm, as it always has been in its times of greatness. A cunning and determined man who sees the world for what it is and not what lobbyists and donors and the masses tell him it is. American presidents have been no match for Russian leaders – not Roosevelt, not Truman, not the present one. This General Hillock, however, may be able to unite the people, push domestic concerns behind him, and thus pose a threat, or at least an obstacle, to Russia’s mission in the world.”

Rublev saw interest in Putin's eyes. Kulikov struggled to comprehend where Rublev was going. The audacious junior officer continued.

“Better to help keep America a democracy. A stumbling, bloated, fiscally irresponsible, indecisive democracy. Did not French kings strive to keep adjacent German duchies constitutional, hence weak?”

Putin had no understanding of what French kings did with German duchies. He nodded thoughtfully, as though reviewing books he'd read on absolutism and the Estates-General, Mazarin and Richelieu. Those names were only empty echoes of his days as a disinterested pupil in dreary college lectures. Putin had a simpler but more practical understanding of history and democracy – power and what increased it or decreased it. Popular government, in its truest and most enduring form, entailed a strong leader winning the admiration of the *narod* by bold uses of military force – Alexander Nevsky, Ivan Grozny, Peter the Great, and yes, Joseph Vissarionovich Stalin.”

Rublev's notion of democracy as a flawed form of government resonated with Putin's beliefs and coalesced disparate ideas into a whole – and then into a policy. A weak and disintegrating America appealed greatly to him. Putin was also worried about the outlandish real estate billionaire on the ticket with Hillock. He was in league with Russian billionaires and planning a campaign for political reform, which included ousting him from the Kremlin. After a nod, Rublev continued.

“America is already weak and if America turns against its military, as it did after the Vietnam War, the country will be all the weaker. Better let the politicians bicker and feud and run up trillions of more debt, and turn away from the world as its contradictions and antagonisms grow.”

Putin was concerned about American operations inside Russia. There'd been two blasts on the Baku–Novorossiysk pipeline and a raid on a small garrison in the last day – the work of Chechen terrorists. One of them was caught and shouted at his interrogators that another uprising was at hand. The prisoner went on to say that Chechens were streaming back from Syria and Iraq and were determined to establish an independent Caucasus homeland for Muslims. He said Russia would pay. The Chechens were certain they'd receive money and explosives from Hillock after his election.

The Russian president wondered if Hillock would be reckless enough to make common cause with them and other Muslim populations inside Putin's vast, heterogeneous empire such as Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. The Americans had

supported jihadis when they fought the Soviet Union in Afghanistan. Had 9/11 changed Washington's strategic calculus?

Putin mulled over Rublev's words and swiftly arrived at a decision.

"Hillock's plans depend on a lawful election, and we can stop him. We must have our media release the data that Rublev has gotten for us. The American public will be outraged and Hillock will lose the election next week."

Rublev was astonished at Putin's creative thinking. It was almost entirely lacking in the Russian military.

Kulikov was dubious.

"If I may be so bold this time, Mr President. If word of Hillock's anti-democratic agenda comes from us, it will be seen as disinformation and lies. Hillock will respond by saying he has been maligned by the enemy and emerge unscathed, if not strengthened."

Putin was enamored by the plan though, and love hides many flaws.

"I have more trust in the American people than you do, Kulikov. And I thank you, Lt Rublev, for coming to my office this day and speaking so candidly. I'm not such a bad fellow, am I."

"Of course not, sir. We Russians admire a strong hand in this office. And a humble lieutenant is pleased to have been of service, small though it may have been." Rublev had learned to be obsequious while performing his military service. Every recruit had.

Rublev and Kulikov stood and headed for the door, where the chief of staff was standing, a look of suspicion and resentment on his face.

"Oh, Rublev. One moment." Putin motioned for him to close the door and return to his desk.

"Yes, Mr President?" Was he to be promoted and appointed his foreign policy adviser? It would be wonderful to leave Kaliningrad behind and return to the capital. Or was he going to be dressed down for speaking up in such a bold manner and sent to Kyrgyzstan to finish his term of service?

"Rublev, is it true you found your way into Brad Pitt's laptop?"

The lieutenant nervously admitted he had, though only with a hesitant nod.

“Were there pictures of many beautiful women to be found?”

Rublev, with even more nervousness, said there were. Where was this inquiry taking him? Was Putin going to ask him to hack into his acrobat girlfriend’s computer?

“Rublev, is it true you can acquire information about American corporate mergers before they take place, allowing for timely and potentially lucrative investments, if one were disposed to do so?”

“Yes, sir. I can do that. But I’ve only –”

Putin waved for him to be quiet then pointed to the smaller desk in front of his own. “Sit down. We have much to discuss – American politics and American finances as well.” Putin opened a drawer. Rublev half expected to see a pistol or pictures from Brad Pitt’s laptop. Instead, the president took out two tin containers and bottles of Polustrovo.

“Dmitri, do you like sardines?”

Hillock the miraculous

Leela and the guys drove south along Skyline Drive, in view of the two branches of the Shenandoah River. The blue waters meandered in near circles on either side of the roadway and almost kissed the wind gaps in the hills in the distance, where the river had won out over smaller streams millions of years ago.

The foliage was past peak, though only by a couple of weeks, and the valleys and hills were lit up in brown, gold, and crimson. A few bare branches could be seen upon closer looks. Leela was pleased that Barrett's eyes were on the landscape and horizon.

Anthony spoke up from the back.

"Hillock's stumping in the area, so there's a chance he'll show up at Keller's revival show. Good for politics, you know."

"Maybe he'll drop out of the race and devote his life to making inspirational videos for Keller." Barrett looked ahead for mileage sign and the exit. "I doubt it. He's seen the promised land and wants to take the American people there. Then he'll light the match that immolates us all."

"That's not what Israeli intelligence thinks, Barrett," Leela reminded. "Cheer up. It's a sunny day, not the end of the world."

The Cayenne turned off at Wayneboro and soon came upon posters tied to stop signs directing them to the House of Eternal Life – the home of the ministry that a local Keller acolyte had founded seven years ago with the help of the bishop of West Texas and his multitudinous and generous flock. "This Way To Eternal Life!" read one sign. Red, white, and blue balloons were tied to each sign. A well-dressed man stood at one intersection, waving welcomingly to all that drove by. Another fellow directed them to an adjacent field that was serving as overflow parking.

“Confession time, Anthony.” Barrett looked about warily, as they were not in friendly territory. “Unburden your heart before we enter the place, *đai uy*. How did you get these three tickets? A hefty donation? Is Keller your true father?”

“Interesting theories. Quite wrong, though. I got them from friends at Bragg. I knew them overseas. Stout yeomen, all.”

A question naturally occurred to the two upfront. Leela asked it.

“Are they believers in Keller and his worldview?”

“They’re religious, for sure. You don’t place your life in danger repeatedly without adopting some sort of faith. Max Weber had some passages on that. But no. Keller’s brand of theology just doesn’t happen to be theirs. They hear a lot of their fellow officers and NCOs speaking highly of him, though. Glowingly, in fact. Keller has a following in the military. My friends find him worrisome and want me to report back to them. Take a look at some of these bumper stickers, aside from the ‘The Day Is Coming’ ones. Man, I used to see those at Langley.”

On the way to the modern building that held the House of Eternal Life, Anthony casually pointed to military stickers on rear bumpers reading, Ft Bragg, Ft Eustis, Ft Pickett, and Oceania, Quantico. One read “Fayettenam Veteran.”

“What’s the decal with the sword across the Washington Monument?” Leela had seen two.

“That’s the Military District of Washington.”

On the way to the hall, she saw two cars with bumper stickers that read, “I believe him, and I believe *in* him.” Another read, “Act Decisively!” She was thankful neither of her associates pointed them out.

The three presented their tickets to a powerfully built and officious gatekeeper and entered an auditorium-like room with a dozen rows of oak pews around an elevated stage bedecked with rows of lilies. Their tickets were for a standing room only area behind the pews. Congregants greeted one another and enjoyed the organ recital by an elderly woman in a long white dress.

“Have you seen Elmer Gantry here today?” Barrett whispered into Leela’s ear.

“Nope. Nary a heifer either.”

The lights dimmed and the music became more spritely. A crowd at a sports event or musical concert might have become more boisterous on sensing the event's beginning. The congregants of the House of Eternal Life, however, became hushed. Those that could, took their seats. Those in the standing area looked attentively to the stage. A handful of people ascended the platform and sat behind a lectern. Leela thought they were Keller's family.

In a moment the Reverend Everett Willis Keller walked proudly to the lectern, eliciting enthusiastic but dignified applause from the assembly. He nodded modestly for several minutes then motioned for silence. The congregants obliged in a matter of seconds.

"My friends, it is a deep honor to speak to you here at the House of Eternal Life. We have all striven and prayed for the fuller unfolding of the divine plan we have all tried to play small roles in, and we all know that the day is coming – soon!"

Keller preempted the applause and cheering with a wave of his arm.

"The signs are everywhere for those who see with their hearts and with their souls. On this day, I am not only honored, I am also humbled. Humbled by the presence of a man who sees the signs, with his heart and with his soul, and who himself I believe to *be* a sign of the divine plan's unfolding. He is here – no, I believe he has been *sent* here – to help anneal the support among the faithful."

Leela looked about and saw countless beaming faces around her.

"He's here," a man to her side whispered to her.

"General Hillock?" Leela summoned a look of eager anticipation.

"Yes, of course. He's here! He's here!"

Leela nodded and looked to Barrett and Anthony, who remained stolid despite the joyful anticipation all around them as word spread from congregant to congregant like a pentecostal flame among anxious apostles.

"I am but a poor and simple servant," Keller allowed the "no's" to swell before shaking a bowed head and pressing his hands to his chest in moving piety. "The sin of pride dwells not in this heart. I am deeply pleased to call upon someone here to speak, to unburden our souls, to gladden our hearts."

An agonizing silence ensued and Keller measured it, reveled in it, and at length put an end to it.

“My dearest congregants, we are blessed this morning, more so than we could have hoped when we set out from the many faithful parts of this nation. It is my great privilege to give you the soldier of the divine will and next president of the United States, General Walton Ambrose Hillock!”

A spotlight flitted about the room as though in frantic search, before coming upon a the general in full military uniform, illuminating the green of his tunic. The response was not simply applause or cheering, though there was much of each. The predominant sound was a sustained “Ohhhhhh!” Awe prevailed over thrill.

Hillock walked humbly to the lectern, bowed and shook hands with Keller, then stood before the assembly, the spotlight still on man and uniform – especially the reds, blues, and gold in the nine rows of ribbons on his left breast. The effusive greeting continued for several minutes until the general motioned that he wished to begin.

“A heartier, more generous, more welcome introduction I could not have imagined, let alone expected. And a more humbling greeting has never been bestowed upon a servant such as I.”

He bowed his head and absorbed the murmuring and occasional claps that came from the assembly.

“We stand in the gateway of a new day. Those who lack faith find them troubling, yet we see the wondrousness in them. We know what lies ahead and we know our role in it. Confident we are. Yet we are daunted by what lies ahead for us and for America. Around the world, in every corner of creation, and even here in America, we see strife and despair and sinfulness. And we must hold fast to our convictions and we must –”

A distraction erupted. A man started shouting unintelligibly not ten feet in front of Barrett, Leela, and Anthony. The man rushed toward the stage, up the aisle separating a bloc of pews. People thought him a repentant seeking forgiveness or one of the faithful wishing to give testimony as to Hillock’s role in our times.

Instead, he drew a pistol and began firing at the stage. Rather wildly, in Anthony’s professional estimation.

Pop! Pop! Pop! Pop!

Four shots rang out in the House of Eternal Life. People screamed in horror. Five men tackled the shooter and wrested a black automatic from his hand.

Stunned gasps and wailings erupted when people saw that Hillock was holding his right shoulder with a bloody hand. He stood erect at the lectern and spoke commandingly into the microphone, "Is everyone alright? Is everyone alright? Worry not of this soldier. It's only a flesh wound." He pointed to the security personnel pinning the shooter to the floor. "Do not harm that man. We are a people of laws and he shall have his day. He will be judged, both here and on Judgment Day, as shall we all. Is everyone alright?"

Barrett, convinced the show was over and the media hoopla just beginning, looked to his friends and suggested getting the hell out of the House of Eternal Life. No one argued. They hurriedly exited along with hundreds of the shocked and tearful faithful. They made it out to the road before as the police and ambulances raced in.

On the way north they listened to radio reports on ANN and BBC. As they neared the Washington Beltway, information about the shooter was coming out. He was from a militia in southern Ohio and believed Hillock was a "globalist," who was part of an immense conspiracy of "international plutocrats" that sought to subjugate the whole world to serve the interests of transnational corporations.

The BBC had been preparing a report on the American militia movement in the presidential campaign and rolled parts of it that evening. It seems that the movement was deeply divided over not only the election, but even Hillock.

Some factions held that Hillock was going to reestablish white supremacy in America and that he therefore merited their unswerving support. Others saw him as part of an international plot which went by various names, including "the Bavarian Illuminati," "the Bilderbergers," and the "Initiates of the Bohemian Grove". The man who shot Hillock earlier that day used the term "globalist", but it was all the same thing to most militiamen. There had even been skirmishes between militia factions while on weekend training exercises in Idaho and Kentucky. Three wounded, none killed.

"They're not very good shots," Anthony wryly observed.

"Probably marines then," Barrett replied with even more wryness.

The three wondered if their understanding of Hillock and Keller sounded any less paranoid than the militias' worldview. The staid BBC would have thought them balmy.

Back in Washington it was clear that Hillock emerged from the shooting with a light wound. His concerns for the crowd and for the shooter were playing well. Every fifteen minutes ANN aired the dramatic footage:

“Is everyone alright? Is everyone alright? Worry not of this soldier. It’s only a flesh wound. Do not harm that man. We are a people of laws and he shall have his day. He will be judged, both here and on Judgment Day, as shall we all. Is everyone alright?”

Leela and Barrett flipped over to other news stations only to find the same footage. Talking heads compared him to Andrew Jackson, who had “cheated an assassin’s bullet” when a pistol aimed toward him at short range somehow misfired. Barrett thought of Lee Harvey Oswald and Edwin Walker.

Saudi Arabia

A group of young men attend a meeting with mullahs and veterans of the war against Russia in Afghanistan and the one against the United States in Iraq. They listen to the now familiar praise for the jihadis in Syria and Iraq and to the calls for others to join them. These men are sympathetic and they have been well trained in marksmanship and small-unit tactics. They would be useful to the fighters up north.

They cannot go, at least not easily. Though in civilian garb that night, they are soldiers in the 10th Mechanized Brigade of the Royal Saudi Land Forces. They are stationed at a base near Sharawrah in the southern part of the country, near the boundary with Yemen. They sometimes skirmish with Houthi rebels along the ill-defined frontier. The Houthis are Shia and backed by Iran.

The 10th Mechanized Brigade sends reconnaissance troops deep into the south where Sunni tribes also fight the Houthis. They meet with tribal elders and scions of the great families who fled the capital Sanaa when the Houthis seized it in late 2014. To their surprise, they find ISIL fighters there. Many of them. Initially wary, they speak with ISIL fighters and quickly discern they are not lunatics as they'd been told. They are experienced and dauntless fighters.

The Saudi soldiers are bemused on realizing how much they and ISIL troops have in common. They oppose the Houthis, support the Sunni tribes, and despise the Saudi royal family.

ISIL leaders tell them what they already know and already despise. Key command positions are monopolized by members of the Saud family. Every brigade and division and corps is led not by a qualified professional, but by a relative of a king who died over sixty years ago. Those outside this privileged network are fortunate to reach the rank of lieutenant colonel.

Back in the Kingdom, the soldiers live in tents along the Yemeni frontier. Their commanders live in comfort in rear areas, and their commanders' fathers live in luxury in Riyadh. Or in London, Paris, Dubai, or New York.

The royal family spends billions of dollars on equipment and training yet they have little to show for it. The equipment is mostly American. The trainers are almost all American. The soldiers feel they serve in a weak army because the country is run by immoral leaders who sit cheek by jowl with the US. They are vassals of the US.

They read and hear of the ISIL army to the north in Syria and Iraq. They see its military accomplishments and audacious if grisly displays of power. Some talk of deserting and going north to join them. Others have a bolder idea.

The grumbling has been spreading in the 10th Mechanized Brigade, surreptitiously of course. Men know who is trustworthy and who is not. The former practice their marksmanship more assiduously and perform small-unit tactics more spiritedly. The senior commanders who live in the rear think they have instilled fighting spirit in the men.

The men have friends and relatives in sister units. The junior officers went to school and trained with their peers in the 11th Mechanized Brigade at Khamis Mushayt, about eighty miles northwest of Sharawrah,

The same is true of the Airborne Brigade at Tabuk, near the border with Jordan. Some of the paratroopers slip across the frontier and listen to Jordanian mullahs in Ma'an, who tell them that the Americans are on the brink of a new attempt to conquer the region. They are already back on Saudi soil at the Prince Soltan airbase and they are returning to Iraq in greater numbers.

Most alarmingly, a general will soon become president. They call him the *Dajjal*. He is of the same cloth as the preacher who burns Qurans and the one who speaks of violating the sacred al Aqsa mosque and the Dome of the Rock atop the Noble Sanctuary. This *Dajjal* will seize the Middle East's oil. He will desecrate countless holy sites. This is clear from documents that Saudi intelligence officers have received from Russian intelligence. The Jordanian mullahs say that the Americans call this campaign "the Project".

Word of the Project spreads throughout the clandestine networks in the three brigades. More and more soldiers become adepts; the high-ranking officers are oblivious to what it going on. They are proud when they see the crisp salutes, precise drill and ceremony routines, and determined faces.

The clandestine network forms a plan, complete with logistics and helicopter transports from aviation units. When the hour arrives, they will act boldly, as no Saudi soldiers have since Abdul Aziz vanquished the Rashidis and Hashemites in the 1920s. The troops of the mechanized brigades will seize Mecca and Medina, cutting off the holy cities from the capital Riyadh, and proclaim allegiance to the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant.

The Airborne Brigade in the vanguard, the rebels will sweep into Jordan, then into Israel. They will surround the al Aqsa Mosque and protect it from the designs of this president-general. Radio broadcasts and social media will implore fellow soldiers throughout the region to break from their decadent commanders and join them in the great battle unfolding. Then they will await the final battle, and the return of the Mahdi.

The Del Lewis Show

“Well, it was bound to happen. Ol’ Del knew it and you knew it too. We all saw it comin’. It’s just too bad the security people at the House of Eternal Life didn’t see it comin’. I have to wonder about them but this isn’t the time to look into it. There’ll be plenty of time after the election is over.

“Have you heard the steady drum beat of criticism against General Hillock? Not here, of course, but over there in the MSM. That’s the ‘mainstream media’ for our new listeners. I always welcome newcomers and don’t want them to feel left out. We’re open to change here just as long as it’s for the better.

“The criticism of General Hillock has been steady and at times deafening, ever since he won the nomination at the convention and united the party and the nation. Most of it anyway. I tell ya, the man was demonized. *Dee-mon-ized!* Why? Because there are people in this country who don’t trust the military. In fact, they *dee-spise* the military. But you know that.

“When you and I see a general, we see someone who has devoted his life to the nation. Someone deserving our appreciation and respect. When those other people – and I think we all know who I’m talking about here! – they see part of the military-industrial complex. Eeesh! What a tired old expression that is. They see a warmonger. They see an insensitive cog in a war machine. Some see a babykiller. Yes, those old shibboleths from the Vietnam days are still alive. I’m ashamed to say so. I wish I could say they went the way of the hash pipe and tie-dye shirt and the headbands, but they haven’t.

“It was only a matter of time. It was comin’. Have I said I saw it comin’? I guess I have. My producer’s nodding his head so I must have said it. It was only a matter of time until the steady drumbeat of criticism and lies got some poor kid so riled, so agitated, that he picked up a gun and went after General Hillock. And that’s what happened down in Waynesboro the other day at the House of Eternal Life. Anyhoo, America was spared. The *world* was spared.

“Now look what’s happened to me. I’m all riled and I don’t want to be. I don’t want to be riled because ol’ Del’s a gentle soul. I don’t want to be riled because that’s not what the Del Lewis Show’s about. And I don’t want to be riled because we have a profound honor today. We have . . . is he on? He is? We have here with us General Walton Ambrose Hillock.”

“Hello, Del. Great to be with you once again.”

“General Hillock, sir. First things first. How in blazes are you?”

“I’m in fine fettle, Del. Don’t worry ‘bout me, as ol’ Marty Robbins used to say.”

“Forgive me, sir, but methinks you’re being a little nonchalant about this. You were *shot*. It’s only because of the grace of God that you’re still with us.”

“The grace of God has certainly always been with me. Maybe God made sure that troubled young man was a poor marksman! The Lord has always favored those who shoot straight.”

“And your reaction that day, sir. Very stirring. You thought not of yourself but of others.”

“Del, I knew I wasn’t hurt bad and I had to see to the other folks there. You know I’ve pinned a number of Purple Hearts on brave young people I served with over the years. Too many, really. I think of those moments as inspiring, sacred, ennobling. They kept me in touch with our fighting men and women out in the field. It’s so important for a general officer to do so. It’s awfully easy to fall out of touch with them.”

“Well, sir, thank you again for your service, and thank you for finding the time to come on my little show.”

“Your ratings tell another story, Del. We’ll be in touch.”

Del held up two fingers horizontally. An intern brought him another glass of JTS Brown.

The Envoy, III

With the election only a week away, work at the Project became more hectic. The pollsters all detected a bump for the general following the Waynesboro shooting. He was up by six points nationally and had all but a dozen of the electoral votes needed to be elected the next president. The Project's pollster added two new questions to its national survey.

Do you think that General Hillock's recent escape from death is a sign of divine favor?

Do you think that General Hillock's recent escape from death is part of a divine plan for America?

About forty-five percent of respondents said yes to both questions. Among likely Hillock voters, the positive responses were in the mid-seventies. The pollster felt obliged to pass on to Woolfolk and Leela that, according to the phone bank, many respondents were enthusiastic when they gave their positive responses. Some were in tears.

Woolfolk was elated. He could have his choice of appointments in the Hillock administration and he told Leela that if she wanted to leave the Project for a few years, she could be his chief of staff or get a plum job in State or Defense – an assistant secretary position.

“Thanks. I'll keep that in mind. What about Anthony Sabatini?”

“Oh, he'll be overseas next year. Pretty sure of that. There's lots to do over there. I'm off to Neiman's in Friendship Heights. I'm getting measured for a few Oxxford suits! That's spelled with two 'Xes', by the way. Common mistake.”

He patted her on the shoulder, much to her annoyance. It was the first such contact and while not out of bounds, it might augur something. Victory has a way of making people heady and prone to foolishness.

She saw no point in asking about a post for Barrett. The very thought caused her to chuckle. He'd been critical of the four-stars ever since the 2003 Iraq War. He'd show up to work in cowboy boots. And ask why there isn't a "bring your wolf to work day".

"Barrett, Barrett, Barrett. You, sir, are a card. You just don't fit in up here in Washington." She tossed aside a packet of national polls and leafed through the data from key states. "Not sure I do either."

The Tuesday before the election, Barrett, Anthony, and Leela gathered at her place in The Envoy. It had drizzled much of the afternoon but stopped in the early evening. A fine haze surrounded the lights of the Whitehurst Freeway and Key Bridge. There was wine and spiced rice wrapped in grape leaves known as *dolma*, though there was no conviviality in the room.

"What do we have?" Leela lifted her hands in frustration. "Do we have any evidence that the Project and Hillock are really planning a break with democracy? Do we have anything more than that whacko gunman in the House of Eternal Life had?"

"Better marksmanship skills?"

The others were in no mood for Barrett's humor. Barrett himself didn't offer a smile. Anthony spoke up, in part to break the tension.

"Leela, you were at the meeting with that investment banking outfit."

"Doern & Vollmer."

"Yeah, Doern & Vollmer. They spoke of doing away with trillions of dollars of debt and restricting congress's ability to rack up more debt."

"Gents, getting the Federal Reserve Board to write off debt is neither illegal nor unconstitutional. The Project ran it past a slew of legal scholars, right and left. And the part about restricting congress, the implication was it would be through military pressure – no, through military *force*. We have the letters of support from a dozen or so generals, pledging their support for decisive action."

Barrett nodded. “And even if we documented the talk of ‘decisive action,’ the generals would say it was an expression of their confidence in Hillock to defend the nation, and the Project could say it simply meant a vigorous use of the veto. Many Americans would dearly love to see that. How many would like to see the US run by the military? Frankly, so many people are disgusted with the polarization and gridlock that military rule might just appeal to them. It’s not as though many Americans are using their rights and freedoms anyway. They have TV and the internet now.”

Leela glared again at Barrett. “We have other stuff from Mossad and Shin Bet. The Iranian operation and the new cold war with Russia.” Leela caught herself. “Yeah, I know. The War Powers Act is almost meaningless and both conflicts will find support with a lot of Americans.”

Anthony looked up, annoyance with Barrett plain.

“The destruction of the al Aqsa mosque and breaking up the Middle East won’t find much support in the public. We have documents on that. Maybe those files will make the rest of our contention more believable.” Leela saw the skepticism on the guys’ faces. “Maybe more believable, maybe less believable. . . . Alright, Barrett. I see gears turning. What’s going on in your mind?”

“We all have contacts in important fields. We all have credibility with them. I know media people, print and electronic. Not so much inside the United States though. We can raise the issue of concern with a military seizure of power.”

“Barrett, the Project people were thinking this through last summer. It – no, *we* – discerned that it wouldn’t happen. We polled extensively and found there was lingering guilt about the antiwar movement of the Vietnam era, when the military from buck private to four-star general was despised, reviled, and mistreated. We found this sentiment even in cohorts that hadn’t been born when Vietnam was on. No responsible media will report that an esteemed general like Hillock is planning a coup. Same with most journalists and academics. There are scores of bloggers who’ll love the story and won’t scruple about documentation. They’re not of much use, though.”

“I can still try. I can give it a shot. Leela, you have contacts with congressional staffers and a gaggle of politicians.”

“Yes, I do, and they’re all in lockstep with Hillock and the Project and everything Hillock and Woolfolk want to see happen in January. I can try with staffers and pols on the other side, but they won’t trust me. They’ll think I’m trying to trick them into saying something irresponsible about Hillock.”

Eyes turned to Anthony. He was looking down, in thought rather than in despair.

“We all know I have contacts in the Company and related bureaus. They’re in lockstep, too. They all loathe Valerie Roberts and I’ve already mentioned the ubiquity of Keller bumper stickers in Langley.”

Barrett broke in, much to Leela’s annoyance. “The military’s in lockstep, *dai uy*. That’s for sure. Up and down the ranks, from sea to shining sea. They see themselves as the last bastion of honor and morality in the country, and look upon American society as decadent and self-absorbed. They interact with civilians here and there but they despise them. They’ll be eager to take the reins out of the hands of civilian dilettantes.”

Anthony’s ire had been building throughout the evening. It erupted.

“Goddamit, no it isn’t! Barrett, it just isn’t so! The military is insulated from the American people but by the same token, the American people are insulated from the military. They don’t understand the military. And that goes for guys who left the military in the nineties, too.”

Anthony paused and pulled back. These were about the only people he trusted in Washington and he didn’t want to break with them. He shook his head and spoke in a lower tone.

“Look, I’m going to meet up with some guys I served with. Guys who know me and trust me. I took an oath to uphold the Constitution and even though I’m no longer in uniform, I’m sticking to it. I’ve seen the military misused and maligned too goddam long. . . . Okay, you two do what you can with your people and I’ll do what I can with mine. We’ll compare notes in forty-eight hours, if we can.”

Anthony finished up the last of the *dolma*, passed on another glass of wine, and headed for his car out on Virginia Ave. Barrett and Leela sat on the couch, leaning against each other, thinking about what they had to do and who they had to meet over the next two days.

Leela and Barrett were taken aback by the emotion from the usually taciturn former ranger. He was the only person they knew who was in touch with people in uniform. It was two am. The mist on the Whitehurst and Key Bridge were thicker now and traffic was negligible. Events were slipping away from them, as was the time when people could determine their lives and the course their nation took.

The National Security Agency in damage control

Admiral Clement Lorain greeted his driver outside his McLean, Virginia house, a colonial with aged, chalky paint covering the bricks, and hopped in the backseat with proud adroitness for the sixty-year-old. With a nod, the car headed to Old Dominion Drive, then onto the Beltway heading for the Baltimore-Washington Parkway. It was not yet seven am and thankfully they'd beat most of the morning traffic. Lorain read the reports for the morning meeting on the ECHELON program with his counterparts from four foreign countries.

As the car turned off the Parkway onto Rt 198, a few hundred yards from the twin cannon on Ft Meade where the turnoff to NSA was, Lorain's cell phone lit up with an incoming call and three text messages appeared on the secure system. He took the call and looked through the messages. Lorain was stunned and he slumped in the seat, just enough for his driver to notice.

Lorain composed himself and made a confident entrance into NSA headquarters, gave cheerful greetings to the employees milling in, then raced to his office where worried aides and section chiefs had gathered in a discussion room centered by a twenty-foot kingwood table with lighter inlays running along the edges. There was no time to bring up cold cuts and cheeses, only bottled water and donuts.

"Alright, Mitch. Give me the rundown."

"Bottom line, sir?"

"Yep. The ol' bottom line."

"Putin claims to have documents stating that Hillock is bent not only on an intensification of Cold War Two, he also wants to break up Russia. Hillock will send troops into Ukraine, Latvia, and Kazakhstan and encourage what Putin calls 'reactionary, neofascist, and Islamist elements' to rise up inside Russia and perform acts of terrorism. The aim is to continue the humiliation of Russia begun with the

breakup of the Soviet Union, which he attributes to globalist Americans and their – his words here – ‘obliging satraps’.”

“What the hell’s a *satrap*?”

“It’s an allied government. The word is Persian, I’m told.”

“There’s my word of the day. Maybe it’ll show up in *The New York Times* crossword puzzle someday. That’s not so bad, Mitch. Just another round of Russki propaganda as in the good old days.” His chief of staff’s eyes were still aggrieved. “I sense you have more for me.”

“Putin went on. Hillock will rule as a military dictator in conjunction with the neofascists, globalists, religious fanatics, and defense contractors.”

“That’s pretty much what my sister thinks. Tell me something I haven’t heard from her in the last month.”

“Yeah. . . . Hillock and those elements will rule through a reformulated body called the New Senate. Congress will be brushed aside shortly after the election, citing the emergency powers in the Constitution. Putin likens this to something called Pride’s Purge.”

“Goddamit, is this a quiz show or a spy agency? I’ll take World History for a million, Vladimir. What the hell’s Pride’s Purge?” The admiral was annoyed by arcana in the briefing. His hand began thrumming loudly on the table as he looked around the table for an answer.

The head of the European desk looked up.

“Pride’s Purge was when Oliver Cromwell and an officer named Thomas Pride cast out the members of parliament who disagreed with him. That was in the seventeenth century, in the civil war period.”

“Fine work, *outstanding* work. Didn’t know the Brits had a civil war. Did the North win that one too? Never mind. Proceed.”

“This part gets a little strange, sir. Putin says the US is planning to send a B-2 bomber to blow up the al Aqsa mosque and the whole Temple Mount complex.”

“Why the hell would he want to do that?” Lorain was less than candid in his question. He was sure it showed.

“It’s part of . . . That is, Putin *says* it’s part of the religious right’s goal of starting the final war between good and evil, which will bring about the end of the world and the Second Coming. He says there’s a B-2 on standby at Whiteman right now.”

Admiral Lorain was not as surprised or amused as others arrayed around the table thought he’d be. He knew the apocalyptic scenario and was appalled to hear mention of it amid the Russian data dump. His wife’s family believed the end of days were at hand as much as they believed the sun would rise in the east tomorrow. He shook his head.

“And why is Putin telling us this? Wait! Let me have a shot at this. He wants to preserve democracy for the great American people – the same people Russia made common cause with against fascism during the Great Patriotic War.”

“Exactly.” Mitch didn’t even look up. “Would you like Russian Propaganda for a million now?”

“No, Alexei, I do not. Did Putin say where the hell he got all these documents?”

More heads looked downward. Mitch couldn’t. He pursed his lips and continued.

“Yeah . . . well . . . it seems his cyberwarfare people hacked into US government servers and downloaded tons of data.” Mitch hesitated to go on to the critical matter.

“*Whose* servers?” An unpleasant thought was dawning on the admiral.

“*Our* servers, sir. Putin claims to have gotten the material from the servers of the National Security Agency.”

“*Oh, my fucking God!*” Lorain all but leapt from his chair. He looked out the window to the traffic on the Baltimore-Washington Parkway and wished he was on it headed for the nearest airport. “Is it true? Please tell me it wasn’t our servers. Please tell me it was the Pentagon’s or CIA’s. Mitch? Start talking here, Mitch!”

“We’re checking now for a breach.”

“You mean you don’t fucking know yet?”

“Admiral Lorain, sir, we collect *petabytes* of data every hour. Maybe more. Hard to keep track of it all. Our people at the Bluffdale complex are looking into it. In any case, the best hackers know how to change time stamps and hide their presence inside

servers. Russia's put together a pretty good hack-crew in Kaliningrad, almost as good as ours. There's a young conscript named Rublev who's as good as anyone we have."

Mitch opened a dossier, revealing a photo of a disheveled young lieutenant in the Russian army that reminded him of a young Austin Pendleton. He slid the dossier toward Lorain who was just returning to his chair. He had a fleeting thought that handing off the dossier was absolving him of any responsibility. "Rublev's damn good. We think he's gotten into Doern & Vollmer's servers. Specifically, the files with information on impending mergers and acquisition. He uses the information to buy options in one of his accounts – in Zurich, Dubai, Singapore. Others too, in all likelihood."

"Sounds like a lucrative hobby for a young lieutenant."

"We estimate he's worth about three hundred million."

"Three hundred million rubels?" Lorain was intrigued by the possibilities.

"Three hundred million *dollars*."

"*Jesus wept!* Sounds like he has a bright future on Wall Street when he finishes his military obligation, assuming Putin doesn't keep him on as a financial adviser. Back to the trifling matter of whose servers this Rublev fellow hacked into. Regardless of whether it came from our servers or those of CIA or the Pentagon, that doesn't tell us where the data ultimately came from. What's the deal with that, Mitch?"

"The press release that the Russian foreign ministry put out this morning says the data was from NSA but originally from the Pentagon, religious groups, and a downtown think tank called the Project for a New American Democracy."

"The Project for a New American Democracy . . . they're the brains behind Hillock, aren't they?"

"Yes. If that's what you want to call it."

Lorain switched on the television and flipped about the news stations – ANN, France 24, BBC, MSNBC, Al Jazeera. They were wall-to-wall with Putin's announcement. The banners and crawls said there was not yet any word from the Hillock camp about the allegations. Lorain was thinking hard about how this would affect NSA and its funding for next year. He had to find a way to protect the Agency and his people's jobs.

“Okay, troops. We have to put out a statement and I’ll be damned if I’m going to talk this over with CIA or the Pentagon. Hell, they’re probably looking for ways to blame us while we sit around trying to find ways to blame them.”

Lorain turned the volume down. The room became more attentive, especially Mitch.

“Let’s see. How does this sound?” Lorain looked at the ceiling and ran off the first draft of an announcement, occasionally waving his hands to get inspiration and inspire elaboration. “We have looked carefully into the Russian president’s allegations and concluded that the data breach – no, *if there was a data breach* – it did not occur here at NSA. Our servers are more heavily encrypted than anywhere in the world – in order to ensure the privacy of our data – oh, and the privacy of the American people as well.”

A few people smirked or chuckled. The admiral paused and looked to Mitch.

The men and women in the room smiled and nodded when Lorain said, “*if there was a data breach.*” They instantly felt more confident in their futures with NSA and the government. Furthermore, they knew if they did not speak, they’d have a better chance of denying allegations of participating in a cover-up.

Mitch picked up where his boss trailed off.

“We had our best people on it since the story broke and have run down every possibility.” Mitch knew the admiral’s mind. “And *while we cannot speak to the operations of other agencies . . .*”

Light laughter could be heard. Lorain clenched a fist and began again.

“And while we cannot speak to the operations of other agencies – you sorry bastards know who you are! – we are certain that we did not collect information from General Hillock’s campaign or the Project for a New American Democracy. Drop the part about the sorry bastards.”

“Done!”

The admiral paused again to ponder his next words.

“In fact, we had no knowledge of the Project for a New American Democracy until this morning. After giving the matter due thought, we’ve come to the firm conclusion that President Putin’s allegations are not necessarily based soundly in fact.”

“And that his intelligence services may have fallen victim to a cruel hoax.”

Admiral Lorain's eyes flared in appreciation. The others in the room nodded. Mitch continued, barely able to avoid a chuckle.

"At this point in time, we are actively looking into the possibility that Mr Putin's allegations are based on little more than the musings of a blogger. . . ."

"One with an anti-military bent . . . or a paranoid streak or"

"Or an uncanny gift for satire unlike anything we've seen since *Dr Strangelove* was released in the intemperate days of the Cold War."

"Outstanding!"

Admiral Lorain sat back in his chair and rested his head in the cradle of his hands folded firmly behind his neck – the same neck that not forty-five minutes ago seemed to be lowered beneath the gleaming, finely-honed blade of a guillotine around which every news anchor eagerly stood. And behind them, eyes bulging, was a jeering mob.

The other grandees of the National Security Agency felt relief as well. It had spread through the room like the joy of seeing their team pull out a last-minute victory against an arch-foe. The NSA would fend off the media and the public once again. Careers were safe. Mortgage checks would go out. And more petabytes would be collected.

Lorain was supremely confident. He had done it again. In recent years damage control had become an important part of life at NSA and he and his staff had defended themselves vigorously.

"Write it up and get it out, Mitch."

"I'll have it for you –"

"Mitch . . . *you* handle the presentation this time. We know you're up to it."

Mitch shuddered. It was *his* neck that would be on the line if the story they'd just concocted was found to be untrue. He saw himself being given a hearty handshake, a plaque, and a mighty heave-ho onto Rt 198. One of the finest public servants the admiral had ever served with. Then off to the guillotine.

By the evening news, Putin's assertions had lost the energy and momentum they had in the morning gray when they burst onto the media stage. By nightfall, the media were

referring to “allegations” and “so-called documents” and “dizzying conspiracy theories.”

The Hillock campaign was so impressed by the NSA statement that they put out their own which paralleled it.

Reverent Keller puzzled everyone by stating that he was pleased that Vladimir Putin had at last recognized the unfolding of God’s plan for America and that the Russian president should come to accept what was to come before it was too late. The media focused on Keller’s indignant objection to Putin’s remark that religion was the “crystal-meth of the masses”.

The monologues of late-night hosts lampooned Putin, saying he had been playing too many games of World of Warcraft and that he should pay more attention to what his own generals were up to.

The best jibe might have been this one: “The source of Putin’s information is his new intelligence director – Oliver Stone.”

Barrett and Leela shut off the TV, unamused. They’d postponed their meetings with congressional staffers and media people when the news broke in the morning. By evening the story was worse than implausible; it had become a farce.

“Well, I know where we can find work.”

Leela waited for him to go on.

“We can write screenplays for Oliver Stone.”

“In Russia . . . with love.”

“I fly to you.”

Barrett’s hands took the shape of a bird in flight and gently hovered over Leela’s forehead.

Whiteman Air Force Base, Missouri

The 509th Bomb Wing is a descendant of the 509th Composite Group, the unit that dropped the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki at the close of World War Two. The old group flew B-29s. The new one has B-2s, a huge aircraft with stealth technology and an ominous bat-like profile. Like the B-52 and many other military aircraft of today, the B-2 can refuel in midair and strike anywhere in the world. B-2s from Whiteman flew missions over Afghanistan and Iraq in the least ten years and practiced strikes in many parts of the world ever since.

The pilots hadn't flown actual bombing missions in many years, but one crew had been briefed on a possible one and trained for it daily. The pilots knew it, the ground crews knew it, everyone on Whiteman knew it.

Every fifteen minutes a B-2 screams overhead, returning from a training mission over the coast of Peru – the whole squadron, except for one plane. Two enlisted men, each armed with a service .45, pass their late-night patrol with a German Shepherd guard dog. The fog is thick, their faces are wet from the mist.

“So I was right!”

“Yeah. You were right. Hedy Lamarr invented a wireless protocol used in cell phones and routers. I checked on Wikipedia. I owe you five bucks.”

“I'll wait for payday.”

“You're a sport. I'm fortunate to have you on this patrol. So very fortunate.”

“I know. We make a fine team. You've heard about the plan for a single-plane mission?”

“I got ears and I got friends, don't I? No big deal. We've sent a single plane to drop a JDAM on leaders of ISIL and to test Chinese air defenses around Hainan Island. Word is we're going to test Putin's air defenses around Kaliningrad. You *will* not speak about these ops when you are off-base, right?”

“Affirmative. I hear about another special op. I’ll bet you have too.”

“Is Hedy Lamarr in on it?”

“Unfortunately not. A buddy from bootcamp was swapping out some bad RAM chips on the CO’s computer and found an interesting file. Sooooo, he opens it.”

“You’re trying to tell me that General Dryden’s files aren’t encrypted.”

“Damn straight they’re encrypted, but guess who does the encryption?”

“Your buddy from bootcamp.”

“That’s a big affirmative. So he opens the file –”

“I don’t want to hear this. It would be . . . what the hell, go ahead. Ya might as well tell me. Just make sure Max doesn’t hear you. He blabs to the other dogs at the kennel. He’ll do anything for a little bacon.”

Max looks at them for a moment then returns to duty.

“Don’t know exactly.”

“Jeez! What the fuck *do* you know then?”

“I know the mission file wasn’t from the Pentagon or SAC. It wasn’t even official. The wording was more like a religious pamphlet than air force mumbo-jumbo. You know, pursuant to this or that, Operation Jackoff will commence at such and such. That stuff.”

“You would know all about any Operation Jackoff. You *are* going to arrive at some point before dawn brings light to my drowsy eyes, I hope.”

“The file talked about a B-2 mission that executes, not the orders of the president, but the will of God.”

“The will of God? He ain’t in the chain of command, as far as I know. Go on.”

“*The wings of America will fulfill God’s plan and bring about the end times.* There was no military header, just some pictures of a Muslim shrine with a gold dome. Looked like it was in the Middle East somewhere.”

“A Muslim shrine in the Middle East, you say. Well, that narrows it down.”

Despite the glib reply, the two pause. They reached the north end of the airstrip where bright strobe lights are flashing out guidance for returning the B-2s. They look out at the cornfield beyond the rows of concertina wire that separates the base from the

farmlands of Missouri. Max searches about purposefully and lifts his leg next to a tall patch of weeds.

“*Wings of America . . . God’s plan . . . the end times*. Look, you better not be yanking me.”

“Nope. You said I was yanking you when I told you about Hedy Lamarr.”

“So the mission is off the books? SAC doesn’t know about it?”

“Affirmative. There were several generals’ names on the file, but the file itself isn’t military. Most of the names don’t even have a rank next to them. They’re civilians, like I will be in 167 days and a wakeup.”

“At last, you bring me good news. Can your friend get the file out on a thumb drive or an iPod?”

“No way. Everything’s become more secure. The IT guys call the new security system ‘Snowden-proof’. He’s gonna take a few shots of the screen with a cell phone next time he’s in there.”

“What’s the name of the pilot scheduled for this op?”

“Walt Newsome. See him everyday when I’m at Mike Sierra-4.”

“Newsome and General Dryden are deacons in the church over in Holden. I think those guys are fuckin’ nuts.”

“I think they’re fuckin’ *dangerous*. We should tell someone about this, but who? Any ideas, Mr Know-it-all?”

“My mother has a cousin in Washington. A second cousin, really. He’s with the Israeli embassy up there. Some kind of attaché.”

“I don’t like it . . . but I don’t like much of anything I see in this country anymore.”

“Another big affirmative.”

The two regard each other carefully for several moments as they think over allegiances and consequences, the powerful strobes illuminate their faces for milli-seconds. A B-2 roars no more than two hundred feet above their heads as it approaches the runway. The tires shriek as they bite into the concrete and the engines spool down.

Hillock in media control

Hillock emerged unscathed from the Putin leak. The news, talk radio, and late-night comedians saw to that. Media consultants go over such events in past campaigns and learn how to handle them, counter them if need be, and after the initial hoopla dies down, turn them into assets. Hillock's chief handler, Journey Wilbar, urged him to go on the offensive. Not on Del Lewis, not on like-minded cable news station. Wilbar urged his candidate to go on ANN. The general was booked on Jack Severson's evening news segment.

The candidate sat in a chair across a table from Severson in a darkened studio. He wore a charcoal suit, pinstripe shirt, medium blue tie with equestrian motifs, and the appropriate lapel pin.

"Mister Hillock, welcome to ANN. It's a pleasure to have you. It's been a little over twenty-four hours since the Russian president came down hard on you. He made some rather interesting charges. Shall we run down some of them?"

"Jack, it would be my pleasure to get right spang down to it. The American people deserve to hear the truth and I know the American people know the truth when they hear it. Just when you think you've heard it all, a wild-eyed Russian propaganda minister in Vlad the Expander's employ comes up with something new."

"Sir, let's begin with the allegation that a Hillock presidency would bring the world to another long period of confrontation with Russia. Cold War Two, it's been called. What say you?"

Hillock had been nodding his head thoughtfully. His response was instantaneous. Hesitation, even to gather one's thoughts, was a blunder. Wilbar had coached him to formulate an answer halfway into the question. Most were predictable. Hesitation conveyed lack of assuredness, equivocation, and unassertiveness. Wilbar calculated that a two-second pause after a single question in a major interview or debate dropped a candidate's approval rating three full points. He called it "Quayle-ing".

“Jack, I have great admiration for the Russian people and I want to see that they live in peace, prosperity, and freedom. They were our allies in World War Two and I hope to bring our two great nations together once more to work on the problems facing the world right now. That, not this Cold War Two, will be my priority.”

“What about Iran, sir? You’ve had some tough talk about the Islamic Republic and some of your foreign policy advisers are advocates of neutralizing its nuclear research sites once and for all.”

“Jack, I have many advisers from across the spectrum. I listen to all of them and weight their counsel carefully. That’s the way I ran Centcom, that’s the way I’ll run the presidency. Iran’s nuclear program worries me – and it worries our allies too.”

“But sir, the International Atomic Energy Agency states that Iran has sent its enriched uranium out of the country.”

“That may be true, but at the end of the day the religious fanatics in Tehran are unpredictable and we need to help the people of Iran bring about change and bring it back into the modern world. A foreign head of state in the Middle East tells me they can’t even wear blue jeans over there.”

“Could change inside Iran be brought about through US military action?”

Hillock nodded once more and took on the look of an understanding school principal.

“Jack, as you know I’m a soldier. And soldiers don’t want war because they have the most to lose from one. I will deploy the men and women of our armed forces only when absolutely necessary. Americans have never shrunk from doing what’s right, and under my watch they never will. But you know that.”

“Would a soldier want to put an end to America’s turmoil by using the military to push aside politics as we know it?”

“Absolutely not!” Hillock’s hand came down on the armrest of his chair. Severson was taken aback by Hillock’s forcefulness. Though not spoken in anger, it bordered on rebuke. “Everyone in the military takes an oath to defend the United States of America and its hallowed institutions.” Hillock’s demeanor swiftly changed to the avuncular. “I think Putin has used military force so much to crush democracy that he sees it in his dreams and puts it into his propaganda.”

Everyone in the studio appreciated the general's wit and the return of his poise. The producer pointed to his watch. Severson glanced down at his clipboard and moved down the list.

"Sir, some people are calling for a return to the draft. Bring back conscription, they say. Many veterans are saying it. Barrett Parker's recent article says a draft will spread out the true costs of war across the social system and get Americans to think more critically about their country's foreign policy. General Hillock, what say you?"

"I'm not familiar with this Barrett Parker fellow, but I don't agree with him. We have the best military in the world. Just look how professionally they've done their duty. All around the world – and in some mighty tough spots, too. Bringing back the draft might have its advantages. There'd be tremendous disadvantages though. It would weaken the camaraderie and reliability that we've built over the years. Our military's effectiveness is based on our young men and women coming from small towns and rural areas, not chaotic cities and comfortable suburbs."

"But sir, isn't diversity in the armed forces desirable?"

"Not so sure, Jack, not so sure. It sounds good to our ears but at the end of the day, I'm just not so sure. We had a lot of diversity and heterogeneity in the ranks during the Vietnam War and that didn't work out so well. Lack of discipline, lack of respect for leaders and orders. Didn't work out well, Jack. The commander-in-chief must be certain that orders will be followed – immediately and professionally and thoroughly. I'm not sure we'd be able to act as decisively as we need to if we had a lot of overprivileged individuals from hither and yon put into the ranks alongside our best."

"Some of your advisers are talking about stabilizing the oil-producing countries of the Middle East by building what's being called a 'private army' composed of experienced soldiers fresh out of American and British armies."

"Yes, we are actively exploring that idea, Jack, and I can tell you and the ANN viewers that I think it's a compelling idea. It truly is. We've seen that the average Middle Eastern boy is brave enough in single combat. The modern world, however, calls for disciplined standing armies and frankly, Jack, that part of the world hasn't been very good at that. A private army of Yanks and Brits would stabilize the important region and teach the countries there how to defend themselves."

"Any chance that this private army of Yanks and Brits would someday exert its influence on governments there?"

"Oh, Jack, really! Was that bit of Oliver Stone in Putin's document dump too? American and British forces have historically brought democracy where they've fought

and died, and asked little in return. It would take a good deal of intellectual contortions to see them as bringing anything besides security and improved rule.”

“Point well taken, sir. Thank you for coming on ANN this evening, Walton Ambrose Hillock.”

“Thank you for having me, Jack, It’s been a pleasure to speak with you and the American people.”

Just offstage, Wilbar shook hands with Hillock and heartily congratulated him for a fine performance. Hillock in turn thanked him for the preparation. All the questions but one had been anticipated. The private army question came out of left field, however Wilbar was sure the general handled it brilliantly. His momentary ire could be called “righteous indignation” over Severson’s “sullying” both the army and the general himself.

Wilbar would speak with Del Lewis later that night. The talk show host liked words like “sully”. Wilbar had already given him “jackanapes” and “mountebank.” People were starting to use those words in day-to-day conversations. Earlier that evening he gave Hillock the word “spang”. It made him sound more down to earth and would play well in the Midwest. Wilbar hoped to hear “spang” a lot in coming weeks. Wilbar prided himself on his role in shaping the public’s vocabulary. He thought it part of shaping the public’s thinking. Privately, he said it was like teaching his cocker spaniel to bark on command.

Polling data showed that many people worried about greater international tensions with a Hillock presidency. All in all, Hillock came across as thoughtful about world affairs and reluctant to use military force.

Wilbar was confident that the campaign had come through Putin’s bolt from the blue. It had probably even softened the general’s negatives. Prior to the interview Wilbar thought the line about soldiers not wanting war might be a little shopworn after so many years of heavy use. His uncle used to say it back in the seventies, albeit sarcastically. A focus group showed it still worked. Wilbar made note of it. The election was just a week away and the polls showed a tight race.

The New American Democracy Manifesto

Stung by the American public's dismissal of his warning about Hillock, Putin released another document, taken from NSA and Project servers. It outlined the changes in the American polity that a President Hillock would push through, with the help of the military. Putin was certain that this would bring Hillock's momentum to a halt.

Excerpts were read by anchors on Russia Today and analyzed in somber tones by hand-picked analysts. Some of them were American, most were British. Everyone in the media knows a distinguished English accent has a talismanic quality with the American people and has helped sell everything from soap to Bentleys.

The full document was also sent to other media in all parts of the world:

Shortly after inauguration, the president will invoke the emergency powers in the Constitution. These clauses are imprecise and have thus far escaped any adjudication that would bring precision. This makes counterarguments weak and unsupported by precedents and interpretations. Furthermore, once invoked, they will be outside the purview of any court.

Congress in recent years has been the center of wasteful spending and fruitless bickering. Both are to be ended at once by relieving congress of duties in the policy-making and taxation processes. This will be effected with the help of the military in what will be called Operation Renew America.

The Project for a New American Democracy has no intention of terminating the principles of representative government and popular sovereignty. However, the dire and worsening circumstances of our day require amending those principles, which are believed to have been stretched far from where the Framers intended. So overstretched are they that the Framers would feel their hopes for democracy had been dashed by demagoguery, complacency, and self-absorption.

The Project for a New American Democracy calls for reforming congress into a more manageable and effective body. The Framers were well versed in history, especially the history of the democracies of Antiquity in which government rested in the capable and judicious hands of men of property and military experience.

Accordingly, the Project for a New American Democracy calls for reducing size and responsibilities of congress and creating a new representative body to be called the New Senate. A group of one hundred citizens will be elected by a more manageable number of voters. Persons of significant property, whose stake in the system gives them gravitas to weigh lofty matters of state in a responsible manner, will elect the members of the New Senate. Less propertied Americans will be de-selected from the process.

In keeping with the principles laid out in the golden ages of Athens and Rome, those who bear arms for their nation shall have greater voice in its affairs. Accordingly, men and women who have served in the US military for at least ten years shall be enfranchised. The Project calls for a “weighted” system, whereby those with greater property or more extensive military service shall have greater say than those with less property and fewer years before the flag.

The Project for a New American Democracy has given thought to the idea of a clergy-based franchise, or a separate representative body comprising clergymen, as found in the constitutional governments of medieval Europe. However, the idea has not been adopted. This was not because of any need for a “wall” between church and state, though the appearance of movement toward theocracy must be avoided. Rather it is because of the need for flexibility and pragmatism in government, which may not come easily to those with deep religious convictions. In any case, religiosity of prospective members of the New Senate will be an important part of the selection process.

The New Senate will be a consultative body, with few defined powers. Senators will of course be the principal source of cabinet secretaries in the executive branch.

The unwieldy numbers gone, debate will be less given to partisanship, divisiveness, polarization, and above all to paralysis and indecision. Americans will grow to feel better about their government, their nation, and their prospects – both for themselves and their children.

At this point in time, state governments are expected to be allowed to function as they are now. Their revenues will be monitored by the New Senate and state

legislatures will operate under the tutelage of their respective national guard commanders.

We envision these amendments as temporary in nature. The franchise will be extended to other parts of the American people when it is deemed beneficial for all. Still, it must be recognized that operations often do not proceed as expeditiously as hoped and it may be necessary for a military tribune to guide newly elected figures for years to come.

The manifesto added little credibility to earlier claims that came from Moscow. It was too wild, too out there, too paranoid. Few people bothered to read it.

Barrett, Leela, and Anthony read it. It made two of them more despairing, more disposed to get out of Washington and head out West.

Del Lewis read it several times. He too thought it was out there, but it resonated with his views of the perils of big government and what a noted historian called “the paranoid style in American politics”. He never read the book but he loved the title and felt he knew the contents. Del’s producer and the program managers across his network wouldn’t agree with his suspicions. Same with almost all his millions of listeners, whose enthusiasm for and trust in Hillock would not be diminished this late. Not by anything ol’ Del said, and certainly not by anything ol’ Vladimir said.

The next day many callers to the Del Lewis Show expressed support for the ideas in the New American Democracy Manifesto. Del shook his head wearily and looked cautiously to his producer. He motioned for the intern to refresh his glass of JTS Brown, then pressed the cough button and told her to leave the bottle.

Americans and their military

For most Americans, the military is a mystery, a black box, a puzzle – a distant and almost incomprehensible subculture, secluded from most cities and suburbs, enclosed by myths both good and bad. Americans prefer it that way. They do not serve in their military nor do they know anyone who has – at least not in the last forty years. It wasn't always that way.

They can go back to the Second World War to find a family member who'd worn a uniform, though many don't recall just where the family member served. "Somewhere in the Pacific" or "Europe, I believe" are all they can say. The shoulder patches and campaign ribbons might be in a closet somewhere but their meaning has been lost. Many patches and ribbons were given away or sold in driveway sales along with old ties and stacks of vinyl LPs.

Publicly, Americans support the troops and express it in ways that are numerous, ubiquitous, and meaningless. They are devoid of any emotional significance – lapel pins and bumper stickers being the most common expression of modern patriotism. Privately, they see the rank and file as luckless youths from small towns and rural backwaters where there is a dearth of opportunity and a desire to get out. More privately, more darkly, they see soldiers as parts of a brotherhood of violence, and keep their distance.

Barrett didn't much care one way or another for public opinion about the military and war. He knew the composition of the army was more complex than the public thought and he'd experienced the secret prejudice against veterans that said honor them from afar, but avoid them in person. Wars, Barrett held, were supposed to be tied to national security – something Americans had forgotten. The patriotic kitsch and darker views of the GI brotherhood irked him; they made people less concerned about casualties. Barrett wept when he saw the images of those killed in action. And anger flared when he saw the leaders, civilian and military, who'd sent them off to wars that were distant, pointless, and foolhardy.

Barrett knew the rank and file weren't from poor backgrounds. That was clear from the stats. Soldiers were mainly from working-class backgrounds and while opportunity didn't abound there, they were attracted to military service by family tradition, the challenge it posed, the desire to be part of something of significance. All that got lost in the kitsch and the assumptions of noble and patriotic intents.

He saw the upper officer corps as increasingly self-contained and isolated from the country as a whole. Many senior officers were the sons of senior officers. They were also close to religious fundamentalism and willing to lazily define the world in good versus evil terms. Yes, the rising stars were sent off to the better universities to get their MAs and PhDs. Their sojourns into civilian academia were temporary deployments into an exotic and off-putting world. They were there to get advanced degrees, the better to rise up the ranks. Their goals and beliefs, largely unaffected by the sojourn, remained behind the perimeters of Hood and Bragg.

Barrett knew a number of rising officers at Chicago and Harvard – fast-trackers with impeccable OERs and degrees from the military's advanced training schools at McNair and Leavenworth. They were part of the officer corps shaped by Vietnam. They'd rebuilt the military from the shambles it was after Vietnam, when cohesion and discipline had fallen away and the public shunned them and mocked them. They vowed to prevent a return to that. They owed it to the military and to the men and women who died needlessly in Southeast Asia.

That generation of officers was gone, replaced by a younger cohort who knew wars as fast and uncostly, victories as inevitable. That was the message of Grenada, Panama, and Gulf War One. That was how future wars would be; their mastery of technique assured it. They were eager to prove it in the far reaches of the world, even in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Barrett mistrusted this young cohort and saw their influence everywhere, uniformed and retired. They gave expert commentary on cable news stations. They sat on corporate boards. Presidents sent them out to engage in diplomacy as much as they sent foreign service personnel.

He had been out twenty-four years, though – a generation in human and institutional terms. Despite claims of timeless continuity, marked changes take place, though not always apparent to the public. You cannot go twice into the same army.

There was a generational shift underway, and Barrett didn't know it. The shift was as profound as the ones after VJ-Day and when the last Huey lifted off ignobly from the Saigon rooftop. The officers who were becoming majors and colonels now had seen war more closely than their generals had. Fifteen years of constant war left a mark on those who'd been out on the operations, walking patrols, taking fire, and zipping body

bags. They'd lost friends, they'd lost young lives entrusted to them. They were affected by the casualties in a direct, personal, human, and irreversible way.

Anthony Sabatini knew them. He was one of them and he knew there were many like him. They had walked patrols together in Anbar and Kandahar and trusted each other more than they trusted the guys up at brigade and division. He nonetheless wondered how many of his kind there were and then how many would follow President Walton Ambrose Hillock.

And how many did Hillock think were on his side and how many, if any, opposed him.

Mountain View Cemetery

“I’m so sorry, Barrett. So sorry. An’ I’ve been takin’ care of ol’ Jesse. Good care too. You can count on that. He’s become a friend. Keeps the coyotes away from my horses. Lost two dogs to those nasty critters over the years. Peter sure loved him. And we all loved Peter. We sure did.”

Sarah fought her emotions with limited success as she let Barrett into Peter’s house. The stillness overpowered him immediately. The fireplace and coal scuttle, dining table and Fiesta plates, had lost the life they’d once been given by a great, humble man.

He picked up the photo of Peter taken when he finished OCS in 1942. No longer a common laborer, he was an officer in the United States Army, complete with Sam Browne belt, charged with defeating the Japanese Empire and the Third Reich. He played a role in the latter, knocking out four panzers including an SS Tiger about ten miles inside the Siegfried Line. The flag from the aerial was in a drawer in the living room, destined for the 3rd Armored Division museum, as ordered. Peter’s stories would stay with Barrett. So would his .45.

“He was like a father to you, wasn’t he. Called you ‘Barry’ like you was his own boy.”

“That he was, Sarah. A better father I couldn’t have hoped for.”

They weren’t just idle words on a sorrowful occasion. Barrett hadn’t talked much to his real father since high school. He left home at seventeen and joined up. Bragg, Knox, the war. Then it was college and grad school. The VA helped, but he had to work odd jobs that fellow students were spared. Hadn’t spoken to his father for over a decade when the phone call came. For reasons he didn’t understand, he felt defenseless and vulnerable.

“He left everything to you, Barrett. The house, the truck. Everything. I got the papers right here. He made preparations after you brought him home last time. He knew. I guess I did too. Jus’ didn’t want to say so. Like if I had, it’d speed him off.”

“I knew too, Sarah. Time and tide wait for no one. I just want a few things. You take whatever you want here and we’ll give the rest to the Salvation Army in Edgewood. Let’s sell the house and give the proceeds to them too. Unless you want it.”

“Naw, I’ll be just fine. Thanks much, anyhow. We don’t need much out here. It’s different back east, I ‘spose.”

The drive to Moriarty was almost pleasant. Sunny and reasonably warm for a late October day. Barrett practiced his talk. He’d made an outline months ago. The cemetery looked out on the dry plains leading to Tucumcari and the Texas panhandle, where elk herds still roamed in goodly numbers.

The military cemetery comprised about five acres covered with dry grass that was kept down by the keeper’s goats and sheep. No ornate markers. Hundreds of simple GI tombstones giving name, dates, and the war the deceased had been in. A few graves were set off with short fences no more than a foot tall, the paint cracking in the New Mexico sun.

Two dozen people, mostly elderly, stood or sat quietly around the open grave next to the one that held Peter’s wife, a nurse he met in England after he was badly wounded near Aachen. Some whispered and pointed when they saw Barrett. They knew Peter had told his war experiences to him and to no one else.

The Albuquerque VA wasn’t able to get an honor guard out to Moriarty, even though Peter worked there many years. But they sent a flag and the local VFW Lodge had a few old guys, mostly with hunting rifles. Barrett appreciated that one had a Garand. Peter didn’t belong to the Lodge but they all knew him from his 3rd Armored cap and brief chats at the Redtop Diner.

After a serviceable Taps was played, the men fired three salutes, then all eyes turned to Barrett. He stood next to the grave, looked out on the plains, and hoped his voice wouldn’t break.

“Peter Novotny grew up in a different America and helped make it better. Over the years we talked quite a bit about things, including our wars. We might have spoken about them more than with others, mostly just about the unusual people and things in our wars.

“We talked about the different sounds we’d heard: the thunderclap of artillery rounds exploding nearby, the ripping sound as rounds fly overhead or come in on you, the dull

thud of mortar rounds and how they thump hard in your chest and skull. You learn those sounds soon enough.

“During his first experience in combat, not far inland from Omaha Beach, he was puzzled by loud cracking noises above him. It was distinct from the muzzle blasts of the Sherman and other explosions around him. After the engagement, he asked a more experienced GI what the cracking sounds were. He explained they were German antitank rounds, the dreaded 88s, breaking the sound barrier just overhead.

“Peter was not deeply troubled by the war, at least not when I knew him. He spoke calmly and clearly about even horrific events. He considered the war as an event that defined him and helped him out of Depression-era life. He became a respected officer, and later a proud member of the burgeoning middle class, both of which he saw as serving his country. I admired him as much for his postwar adjustments as for his wartime accomplishments. He looked upon his war service as something that he and millions of other Americans had to do and he never thought he’d done anything remarkable . . . though of course he had.

“The most remarkable thing he ever said was in passing. In the many years after the war, while traveling on business or pleasure, he would make a point of meeting families of soldiers from G Company who’d been killed in the war – ‘my boys’ as he called them. He would meet with family members and tell them, as best he thought fit, where and how their loved ones met their deaths.

“I’ve told that to a few people, not many. Non-veterans think it’s touching – and it is. Of course, it is. When I tell it to war veterans, however, they’re amazed, stunned. They look at me and wonder if they’d heard me right. They try to see themselves in such a situation, but they cannot. They then think how noble he was and how painful those gatherings must have been, perhaps especially for him. Greater courage and decency neither they nor I could ever imagine, let alone exhibit.”

Barrett had to pause. He looked out to the east again, far past Tukumcari and the Panhandle. After a few moments it was clear he had no more to say, or could not say any more. People slowly filed away from the gravesite. Some smiled and nodded to Barrett. He saluted the pine casket and bowed his head.

Barrett and Jesse walked up the deer trails of the eastern slopes of the Sandias, not far from North Mountain. Early afternoon, the sun went straight through the thin air and left it cool, but hit their bodies with enough strength to warm them. They reached the reddish brown rock and rested. Barrett took off his backpack and opened a bottle of Calvados. He raised the bottle in toast and took a generous swallow. The brandy burned its way down as he looked out to the east. He saw flaming Iraqi tanks and then

an SS panzer with its turret blazing like a roman candle after its ammo and fuel had ignited.

He listened for the sound of nearby hikers and satisfied there were none, took the .45 automatic from the backpack and pondered its remarkable journey from a foundry in Connecticut to Normandy to Germany to New Mexico. Jesse looked up at the sound of the slide being pulled back halfway and the hammer going all the way back. He'd seen Barrett do the same with the Makarov he brought back from Iraq. It made him uneasy.

"It's okay, pal. It's okay." He rubbed Jesse's thick ears until he settled down. "America's seen better days, Jesse. Peter's generation is almost gone now, replaced by, well, not much. Not much in my generation or the next one. They don't see what's going on in the country. Not sure they really care if Hillock and the Project for a New American Democracy have their way. Then why should I, Jesse?"

He aimed the pistol out to the east, imagining a target or two before squeezing the trigger and letting the hammer fall on the empty chamber with a sharp click. The great wolf looked up again.

"You know, Jesse, I wonder how Peter was able to go through so much and still be able to care and feel. I sure didn't see near to what he saw – losing 75% of his boys from Normandy to the Siegfried Line. I still see life as a parade of blunders and I have to take them without hope of redemption or reward or happy ending. Or even an adequate explanation of why they happened."

He again pulled the hammer back and squeezed the trigger, letting the hammer fall on the empty chamber.

"I only care about Peter and you, and you're the only one left, pal."

He stared out to the east, thinking about St Lo and Medina Ridge, New Mexico and Washington, Peter Novotny and Walton Hillock.

"Then there's Leela, isn't there."

Jesse welcomed a softer look on Barrett's face.

"C'mon, pal. Sorry but I gotta take you over to Sarah's place. I'll be back in a few days, after the election. Pretty sure."

Jesse glanced at him for a moment then continued down the trail to the rock-strewn talus.

The King Solomon Hotel, Jerusalem

Morning brought the call to prayer and a light mist to the holy city. Traffic began to fill the narrow tree-lined streets as people went to work or visited the countless places of interest, both religious and architectural. By late morning, the mist was lifting grudgingly. The sun lit up the gold of the Dome of the Rock and the colonnades of the al Aqsa Mosque atop the sacred hilltop known as the Noble Sanctuary in Islam, as the Temple Mount in Judaism and Christianity.

Mullahs gathered inside the al Aqsa Mosque and listened to one of their own speak in considerable agitation. He was a *sayeed*, older than most, and well respected for his wisdom and knowledge of the Quran and Hadith. He was well known throughout the Middle East, especially in Saudi Arabia – especially in Saudi army garrisons. He had awoken from a fitful sleep, pondered the fleeting images of his dream, and compared them with passages from holy scripture and apocalyptic tracts that were flourishing in marketplaces throughout the Islamic world.

He spoke of hellish tunnels burrowed beneath their very feet, hosts swarming into the region, and stars crashing down on the Noble Sanctuary. The men gathered on the holy site are both horrified and joyous. The two passions intermingled freely, reinforced one another, and linked the men to the imminent unfolding of dreaded yet yearned for events.

Anxious discussions follow. Quotes and exhortations echo from the blue marble and tiles.

“Behold! God sent me with a sword, just before the Hour, and placed my daily sustenance beneath the shadow of my spear.”

It’s clear to everyone. *Masih ad-Dajjal* was soon to come.

Almost everyone.

Daud Sharabi was religious and prayed several times a day. He knew scores of passages from the Quran by heart. He wondered why he wasn't excited about the dreams and prophecies and thought it was the burdensome and technical aspects of his work. It required knowledge of architecture and archeology, intuition and logic, software and weaponry, fellow Muslims and counterparts in Israeli security organizations. He was charged with protecting the al Aqsa Mosque and talk of the *Dajjal's* coming worried him. Not spiritually, practically. The belief in the imminent arrival of the *Dajjal* would bring trouble, regardless if the mythic figure from his faith's view of end times presented himself or not.

Sharabi saw his fellow security personnel caught up in the excitement. They'd be of little help in calming the situation once events were set off. He walked through the double gate then down the stairs to the streets of Jerusalem. Cabs and jitneys were bringing people to the holy site and Sharabi wondered if there were more than tourists among them. Near the Western Wall Plaza, he texted Zapporah Marcus through an encrypted cell phone she'd given him, asking to meet with her. She replied immediately and told him of a secure place in the King Solomon Hotel where she'd be in half an hour.

As he walked west to the meeting place, he reflected that King Solomon was renowned for his great wisdom and respected in both faiths. That virtue was in short supply.

He'd dealt with Ms Marcus before when the mullahs were convinced that an Israeli archaeological dig was placing an immense quantity of explosives underneath the Noble Sanctuary and determined to blow it sky high. She brought in a professor from Jerusalem University to meet with the mullahs and explain the discovery of Roman inscriptions near street level. The mullahs were allowed to see for themselves that there were no explosives. The mullahs were satisfied for the moment but they nonetheless warned Sharabi, "Never trust a Jew".

The dig went on for two weeks and found a few more inscriptions and artifacts, none of great significance outside the field of anthropology. They went back to their university. Sharabi was impressed by Ms Marcus's ability to take charge, treat fairly with both sides, and cool things. She has ability in the abstract and that was increasingly rare in an age of bureaucratic specialization and religious hatred.

Sharabi mused as he pondered the paradox of trusting a woman in Shin Bet. He smiled even more as the meeting seemed like an assignation. His countenance changed as he thought that if this meeting were discovered, he'd be suspected of arranging the assassination of someone in Fatah or Hamas, and put to death immediately.

The greetings were formal and correct. They sat at a writing desk in a hotel suite that might have been otherwise used by a mid-level manager. A simple brass lamp, Utrillo

prints of Roman streets, veneer furniture. It occurred to Sharabi that the conversation might be recorded but the matter was pressing and higher-ups would be unlikely to understand it. They spoke in Arabic.

“Ms Marcus, the clergy of the Noble Sanctuary are in considerable agitation. There are dreams, yes, and more troubling there are reports from Syria and Saudi Arabia. These reports I consider reliable, extraordinary, and alarming.”

“Signs and wonders have been seen by many in recent weeks, Mr Sharabi. Regardless of one’s religion, regardless of one’s religiousness.”

“The dreams of an elderly mullah are in and of themselves matters of only passing interest to me, Ms Marcus. Yet if those dreams are interpreted in such a way – and the faithful act upon such interpretations – well, events could grow far out of my control.”

“Out of the control of both of us, Mr Sharabi. I’m not a psychiatrist and Shin Bet does not indulge in dream interpretation. Please tell me, that is if you can, about these dreams. We have both read the Book of Daniel, I presume.”

A trace of a pleasant moment appeared on each of their faces.

“The mullah spoke of a vivid dream in which stars appear from the skies to the west.” He looked out the window, half expecting a sign to appear, telling him to end this meeting with the enemy. Turning back to Ms Marcus, he saw a professional woman who wanted to defuse the powder keg that so many people were eager to detonate. “The dream also contained more tunnels beneath al Aqsa and the Dome of the Rock, and in conjunction with the stars, great ruin is visited on our holy site. Devastation from below, devastation from above.”

The imagery resonated with information Shin Bet possessed. Not from dreams, but from Mossad and a military attaché at the Washington embassy. How much could she say? Could she exchange hard intelligence for a holy man’s dream?

“Mr Sharabi, we are on a heightened state of alert around the Temple Mount, although it might not appear that way. As for the tunnels, there are none underway and there will be none underway for quite some time. They will only resume after discussions with the keepers of al Aqsa. On this, I give my word.”

The mullah’s warning came to him.

“As for the stars visiting great destruction, I can only say that we have been apprised of a threat from aircraft and that we are taking extraordinary steps to prevent this.” Sensing that Sharabi was about to ask for clarification, and from her view

understandably so, she added, “I can only say that we are taking *most extraordinary* steps and that we shall see that no harm comes to the Temple Mount. Now, to return to the matter of tunnels, that can be more broadly interpreted as referring to the threats of ground troops.”

“And these ground troops may, in their own misguided estimation, plan to defend the Noble Sanctuary.”

“Yet in their fervor, Mr Sharabi, they will destroy it.”

A car horn blared from Golders Green Road then dopplered as it sped by the hotel.

“A passage from a dubious prophetic text is circulating, here and throughout the entire Middle East. Are you familiar with a figure known as the *Dajjal*?”

Marcus paused, though she didn’t have to, then nodded. “The *Dajjal* is a figure not unlike the Anti-Christ in Christian thought. The *Dajjal* will do great harm to al Aqsa and bring about the final battle and the end of the world.”

“He is an Anti-Christ and his arrival is a call to action. In that respect, the *Dajjal* is akin to the red heifer for sectaries in the Christian faith as well as your own. When the *Dajjal* appears, it is the sacred duty of all Muslims to act, to rise up, to come to the defense of al Aqsa and the Dome of the Rock. A phrase is being repeated fervently all around us: ‘Behold! God sent me with a sword, just before the Hour –’ ”

“ ‘and placed my daily sustenance beneath the shadow of my spear’.” Marcus completed the quotation from Islamic apocrypha. A brief look of concern came across her otherwise professional countenance.

“ISIL is less than two hundred kilometers from here, Ms Marcus. They are breaking off from engagements in Iraq and reinforcing positions near the Golan Heights. The elders in the West Bank and in Sinai believe that Saudi troops will also come to the defense of al Aqsa.”

“Yes, there are three brigades prepared to move into Jordan, then into the West Bank and Jerusalem. I suspect you do not believe in this *Dajjal*, Mr Sharabi. Yet one can nonetheless believe that others see him today in the world. Is this *Dajjal* believed to be with us today?”

“It is believed that the *Dajjal* is indeed walking the earth this day. Not in Jerusalem, not in the Middle East. He is a general, an American general. Walton Hillock is believed to be the *Dajjal* who will destroy al Aqsa, if not from the ground, then from the western skies. Perhaps from an American aircraft. In our age of social and political

fragmentation, people reach for a some kind of whole, no matter how mad and ruinous it may be. Ms Marcus, let us hope your extraordinary steps can suffice. If they do not. . . .”

“Then we shall not have any more exchanges of mutual benefit in the King Solomon Hotel.”

“That in itself would be a pity.”

“Then we must try to stop this, Mr Sharabi. *Insha’Allah*, of course.”

“Yes. *Insha’Allah*.”

Sharabi walked back toward al Aqsa, repeating the apocalyptic phrase, “Behold! God sent me with a sword, just before the Hour, and placed my daily sustenance beneath the shadow of my spear.” He found the passage a nightmarish eddy that pulled him down deeper with every word and every recitation. It was concise, rich in imagery, commingling beauty with horror. In the hearts of the faithful, the two swirled into a vortex of certainty and inevitability and justification for slaughter. Looking around and seeing their brethren in the same vortex, they would jubilantly go to war, and to their deaths.

Ahead, only two hundred meters now, stood the majestic gold dome atop the sacred hill – the Noble Sanctuary as his faith called the Temple Mount. He shook his head as though casting off a curse. Strange ideas swept through him. Among them was the realization that he trusted a Shin Bet officer, and she him.

Sharabi determined to send his wife and children to Nablus for a while and he had no idea how long that would be or how he would explain it to them. He hoped Ms Marcus had also sent her family to safety.

He ascended the steps near the Western Wall and prayed softly as he looked out on the city – its hills and shrines and venerable buildings from centuries and empires past. The Babylonians had been there, also the Greeks, Romans, Umayyads, Fatimids, Franks, Turks, British, and Jews returning from the Diaspora. He wondered if Jerusalem would survive what was coming this time.

Fort Bragg

The three lieutenant colonels wore camouflage fatigues as they carpooled north on the All American Parkway until they entered the post. It was Rod Valsen's day to drive. His SUV was roomy despite their briefcases and the football gear his son had left in the back.

A sentry inspected their IDs then saluted smartly. Two of them had recently returned from Afghanistan. The third had been in southeastern Iran with Baloch insurgents before attending the War College in Washington. All three had been promoted to light colonel in the last two years then posted to 82nd Airborne where they were now battalion commanders.

"So the legendary Anthony Sabatini has bad feelings about what's going on in the country, especially up there in Washington. Same with that Barrett Parker guy who wrote an outstanding article on cohesion in combat units across three wars. We read it at the War College. I wanted to invite him up to speak but the director shook his head on hearing the name."

"Who the hell doesn't have a bad feeling about what's going on?"

"Did those two guys have any idea what this meeting at division was about?"

"Maybe a little more than we do. Anthony didn't say though. You can't trust your email or phone these days."

"So then you couldn't ask if he blew up that Iranian nuclear site."

"I *did* ask him. He said he thought you did it."

The three rolled about as they passed a couple of golf courses on Bragg before heading for division, where the meeting was set for 09:00.

“We sure as hell don’t stay in for the pay or the easy work. We stay in cuz where else can work with fine honorable folks like us.”

“And get paid to jump out of airplanes.”

“Only birdshit and paratroopers fall from the sky.”

All three spoke the words simultaneously. The line was too old to elicit laughter. It probably went back to World War Two when the All-American Division became the first parachute unit then, in late 1942, leapt out of darkened C-47s into the inky North African night.

Three dozen men gathered in the division meeting room. On the dais was a podium behind which stood the American flag and the banner of the 82nd Airborne Division with battle streamers reading, “Meuse-Argonne,” “North Africa,” “Normandy,” “Vietnam,” “Panama,” and “Iraq.”

They all knew each other from West Point, training operations, the O Club, or their kids’ sports teams. They had all been in before 9/11, if only by a year or so.

On that morning, huddled around televisions at battalion or in company day rooms, they realized they’d begun their service at an auspicious time. Theory would be put into practice and the next rifle ranges would have two-way fire. They’d be defending their country soon somewhere around the world, though they didn’t know exactly where that morning. Long stays in Afghanistan and Iraq wouldn’t have figured too highly in many estimations.

“Ten hut!” The divisional adjutant called out and the commanding general, Major General Blanton Keating, strode in purposefully from a side door and stood erect at the podium.

“At ease, gentlemen. Please take your seats. Be advised that all cell phones will be off and no written notes will be taken at this morning’s briefing. Nor will the material covered be mentioned outside this room until such time as division authorizes it.”

Everyone had shut off their cell phones before entering the room. SOP.

“We live in momentous and challenging times. Like it or not, we live in interesting times. We are fortunate to be soldiers in these times. We are soldiers, *American* soldiers, and we are part of a storied division that has played vital roles in our country’s history for over a century now.”

Keating didn't look at his notes. He scanned the room as he spoke, making as much eye contact as he could and noting the Combat Infantryman Badges on all his battalion commanders – a decoration that timing had denied him.

He continued.

“We *will* play such a role again, and soon. Our nation is in trouble, both politically and morally. She is in need of a stronger hand at the helm to return her to our sacred grounding and destiny. That calls for decisive action. Operation Renew America will ensure that a stronger hand is placed at the helm until such time as the nation is ready to return to responsible government.

“We have been assigned the tasks of guarding key locations in the Washington, DC area beginning on or about 20 January of next year, though earlier deployments are possible. The Stryker Brigade has already taken up positions on Ft Belvoir and Ft Meade. The locations assigned us are the Pentagon, White House, Capitol, Supreme Court, and all approaches to our Nation's Capital, including the Potomac bridges and Reagan Airport. Sister divisions have been assigned to guard other locations around the country that are vital to national security. We have been given the most important assignments. We are grateful for the trust shown us, and we will not shrink from our duty.

“Brigade commanders have been issued specific details on your battalion's assignments in Operation Renew America and you will begin going over them this afternoon. We were all well trained in civil operations before deploying to Afghanistan and Iraq. We're simply putting that training into practice in a new theater of operations.

“Gentlemen, we have been instructed that our mission is temporary. We shall fulfill it professionally and fully, whether it proves to be temporary, or not. God bless each of you and each of the men and women in your battalions. And God bless America.”

“God bless America!”

“Ten hut!”

All stood as General Keating left the stage. Thackeray, Grierson, and Valsen looked around and saw more than a few nodding heads and pleased faces. Friends made eye contact with friends but the overall feel was a professional briefing on a mission of considerable boldness but one they'd been trained for, and one they'd see through. A few majors and colonels looked at the three, though only briefly.

Thackeray, Grierson, and Valsen sat in the SUV silently. Thackeray, the West Pointer, was first to speak.

“Operation Renew America, in Washington, DC. Our nation’s capital. Well, my friends, we had to assume the role of the government in a lot of places – Bosnia, Somalia, Kosovo, Haiti, Afghanistan, Iraq. Then Iraq again. Pardon me if I left a country or two out. There was no one else who could govern, so it fell to us. We saw that there was water and electricity. We built schools. We settled disputes between tribes and clans and between family members too.”

Grierson picked up the flow.

“We were all three branches of government over there. This is just the logical extension of Iraq and A-stan. What was it that the French king once said? ‘I am the state’? Then look what the French army did after Indochina and Algeria. They helped remove a politician from the presidency and put a general in his place. Then they tried to kill him.”

Grierson’s words were bitter, almost angry. It fit the mood of the others.

“Temporary, or not. Temporary, or not.”

Thackeray had the most time in grade. “Gentlemen, we have to do our duty. Just as soon as we figure out what the hell it is. . . .” The pause was long and painful. None of them was accustomed to long debates. They were men of action and they needed a plan. “After these meetings at brigade, I suggest we hold separate meetings with company commanders and senior NCOs. No need to tell brigade or division. Agreed?”

“Affirmative there. When do we hold these nonexistent meetings?”

“Yesterday. Yesterday’s a good day for nonexistent meetings.”

“The best. I held one last week.”

“Our careers are on the line.”

“Our necks are on the line.”

“Nothin’ new.”

A “Huah” followed, with neither conviction nor unison.

Valsen started the car and headed for brigade headquarters. Along the way they passed hundreds of soldiers doing PT on the expansive athletic fields and marching in cadence out to rifle ranges. Spirits were high.

*If I die in a combat zone
Box me up and ship me home.*

The two golf courses of Ft Bragg were far behind the three colonels. A half dozen Black Hawks zoomed overhead as they took off from Pope and headed west before turning sharply to the north.

*Pin my medals on my chest
Tell my mom I did my best.*

*Airborne!
Airborne!*

Election day

The morning began with the usual mummery. Cameras followed candidates into polling places and dutifully recorded them standing with family members, exuding confidence and respectability. Cheerful young campaign workers, their energy boundless, handed out brochures just outside the schools that served as voting stations, and drove to the homes of the elderly to get them out to vote. The rituals proceeded in towns and counties and states across the country. Americans were at least united in the shared pageantry of election day. Not everyone took part, though. Polling data predicted a light turnout.

Too much nastiness in politics today.

My vote doesn't count for much.

I have to work.

The traditional justifications were amplified by worry there'd be sharp arguments and contumely at the polls. Maybe fistfights too. There'd been more than a few of them in the last months, in barrooms, college parties, and even in a few homes. Governors of several states placed national guard units on standby "as a precaution". People felt reassured.

Del Lewis was oddly dispassionate that day. On other election days he vigorously encouraged his followers to get out and vote, and to get friends and neighbors to do the same. It might be more accurate to say he *ordered* his followers to vote and help others to do so.

Ol' Del began his show by running down the dangers of a Roberts presidency but then shifted to talking about the perils of religious zealotry and about how both parties were capable of supporting a big powerful state apparatus that endangered personal freedoms. Late in the show he said that listeners might want to think about a third party that day.

“What I’m trying to tell you is to be careful. Don’t take anything as it seems. Ya just can’t do that in this day and age. Look behind things. Look behind people. We got politicians all across this great land that ya just can’t trust. But you know that.”

His producer behind the glass was puzzled, then upset. The phone bank in the control booth began to light up. Some of the calls were to the show’s private number.

Pollsters also saw a tight race. Hillock had a three point lead in national surveys. That was within the margin of error, given sample sizes. In any case, presidents aren’t elected by popular votes. They’re elected by the Electoral College, and state tallies were tighter and less conclusive than national polls. It would come down to five states: Ohio, New Mexico, Pennsylvania, Colorado, and Florida. Both campaigns had allocated money for aggressive ground and air campaigns in those five states.

Rather than watch the results come in at the Project for a New American Democracy that evening, Barrett and Leela dined at The Good Fork. They’d invited Anthony to meet them there but his answering machine at work said he was out of town and he wasn’t picking up his cell. Phuong greeted them and astutely sensed they were not in the best of spirits and kept the salutations less effusive than his wont. Everyone had been down or tense in the last few days. Phuong couldn’t wait for the election to be done with. Business was down and his servers were complaining about the tips.

They went back to the Envoy and diligently avoided watching the returns, at least not until after the West Coast polls had closed at ten pm eastern. The cable guide revealed a number of election-related films: *The Candidate* with Redford, *The Ides of March* with Clooney, and *The Best Man* with Fonda. Uninterested in exploring American political processes anymore, they came across *Five Easy Pieces* and picked it up early. Karen Black was sitting on the sink in her waitress skirt. Barrett mouthed along some of the dialog.

“No one would want to hit on ya, Leela. Ya look too much like a Straussian professor.”

She managed a soft giggle and leaned against him.

“Some men just aren’t worth standing by.”

“Go fix me a chicken salad sandwich – on toast.”

She slid a hand between his knees.

After Jack rode off to Alaska in the logging truck, they reluctantly switched to ANN. The anchors were running down the states and placing large checkmarks next to an image of Hillock or Roberts to indicate a winner or projected one.

The rundown wasn't surprising, until they got to Colorado. It had gone to Hillock by five points. Then Pennsylvania went to Roberts by a slightly smaller margin. She was up a few points in the electoral college but still short of the 270 votes needed to win. Rural precincts were coming in slowly so it looked like the outcomes in the remaining states of Ohio, Florida, and New Mexico wouldn't be known until the middle of the night, if then.

Barrett explained that New Mexicans will appreciate the attention because many Americans think it's not a state but a province of Mexico. When Leela looked askance at him, he told of the two occasions when DC postal workers had refused to ship his books media rate because they insisted New Mexico was in another country.

"In a way, it is. A very good way."

Leela yawned and headed to the bedroom. Barrett wanted to watch Al Jazeera or the BBC to see if anything else was happening in the world and said he'd turn in a while later.

She started to move his travel bag off the bed and noticed how heavy it was. Curiosity getting the better of her, she opened it, moved a shirt and a few pairs of socks, and felt cold metal. Holding the bag under the lamp, she saw the pistol.

"A .45 automatic. Army issue. Old."

She held the weapon in her hand and pressed the flesh between her thumb and index finger into the safety mechanism beneath the downed hammer. She wondered what the gun had witnessed in its long life, and why it was in Washington.

Decisive action

By noon the following day, New Mexico had gone for Roberts. Though a full state in the United States, despite the demurrals of the post office, the Land of Enchantment had only five electoral votes and while Roberts welcomed the news, it was plain to all that the election still hung on what happened in Ohio and Florida. They were both too close to call, even sixteen hours after the polls closed. Some precincts stayed open till eleven pm owing to shortages of ballots and bugs in the machines in city precincts. No chads in either state anymore.

By late afternoon, both states showed Roberts up by four thousand votes in Ohio, fewer than that in Florida. Election laws in both states mandated recounts and that would take a few days, at least.

The Hillock campaign insisted that the ballots be held in trust by national guard units and the two governors dispatched troops to every precinct in their states. The Roberts campaign thought this unusual and was equally puzzled why guard units had been mobilized the Monday before the election. The Roberts campaign managers in Ohio and Florida thanked the governors for the offer to safeguard the ballots, and praised the national guards for their professionalism, but argued that state election committees should hold them.

When the state governors declined, and guard units began arriving at polling stations, the Roberts people went to the courts and petitioned for injunctions against the guard units' taking the ballots. The lawyers argued that while it was not specifically proscribed by state law, it was highly irregular. They further argued that while the professionalism and impartiality of the national guard was not in question, the appearance of something untoward had to be avoided.

One lawyer's words were especially impassioned and oft-repeated on the news: "In troubled times such as the ones we find ourselves in, where mistrust and irresponsible speculation in the media are unfortunately rife, the American people must have absolute certainty as to the propriety of their election process. Mistrust and

irresponsible speculation are the more regrettable as the Ohio national guard commander served as General Hillock's intelligence chief when they were serving their country in Kabul, Afghanistan."

The judge was clearly struck by the connection between Hillock and the guard commander, and immediately ordered an injunction against the guard actions. He did feel the need to point out that the state election committee, which would now control the ballots, had long been tied to Valerie Roberts's party and many of them had appeared at fundraisers for her. Similar arguments were heard in Florida courts and while no connection between Hillock and the guard commander could be established, the judge sided with the Roberts campaign.

Guard units in both states withdrew from polling stations. They did not demobilize and return to civilian garb and their regular jobs. They stayed at their armories, ate MREs or called out for pizza, and awaited further orders.

Voters in Ohio and Florida felt something amiss. So did those in other states, even where the race had been decided within a few minutes of the polls closing and one candidate had won by a dozen points or more. The violence that had flared in late summer was reigniting. A police shooting in Cleveland triggered civil unrest and three police cars were shot at. Fortunately, none of the officers were hurt. The chief of police debated pulling officers off the streets in many neighborhoods. The commander of the national guard stated that his troops were on alert to deal with any disturbances.

Secession movements returned to the fore. Governors of western and southern states held conference calls, spoke with police chiefs and guard commanders, and met secretly with local Hillock campaign chieftains. Governors in the East and on the West Coast did much the same, though events in Ohio made them wary of their guard commanders. They were especially unnerved when a southern governor spoke of forming the "Christian States of America."

By Thursday, with the recounts just beginning in Ohio and Florida, self-appointed militias had assembled. Some "seized" town halls and local airports. It had little significance as the seizures in most cases amounted to nothing more than standing outside a building or two with a shotgun or an AR-15 in camouflage gear they'd bought at surplus stores. They ate MREs and assumed looks of determination. Townspeople knew most of them as guys who worked at Wal-Mart and local garages.

Elsewhere, the militias were not so farcical. Some members saw Hillock as a national savior. Others were certain he was a globalist who would take away their rights. Shooting erupted in several areas. By Friday, six people had been killed and another fifteen wounded.

For all the tension and animosity and killing, there was a common element in all groups. They mistrusted the election and felt sure the Ohio and Florida recounts were fixed by one side or the other. Mayors felt that way and so did governors, campaign workers, and guard commanders.

Friday night, General Walton Ambrose Hillock had had enough of the indecision and growing anarchy. He saw the country falling apart. He called in his staff, discussed the situation, and concluded he could no longer sit by at his home in Reston. He needed to act.

Tomorrow morning, he'd don his dress uniform with row after row of medals and a driver would take him to Ft Belvoir where a Black Hawk helicopter from the Stryker Brigade would fly him to Ft Bragg. A detail would escort him the mile and a half to division headquarters. There he would address a gathering of senior officers of the 82nd Airborne Division, and order them to implement Operation Renew America.

Hillock comes to Bragg

The Black Hawk darted southward at two thousand feet, using I-95 to its east as a guide. Just past Richmond and Petersburg the terrain became covered with thick pine forests which persisted until they were well inside North Carolina and the town of Fayetteville came into view on the horizon. Receiving swift clearance, the Black Hawk descended onto Simmons Airfield – the smaller, more discreet of Bragg’s airfields. It was from Simmons that special forces operations began and ended in relative secrecy. What went on at Simmons, the joke went, stayed at Simmons.

The chopper yawed at an almost sickening angle as it descended, then pitched upward to slow rapidly before touching down. Commanding general Keating and his adjutant were there to meet Hillock with crisp salutes and determined faces. A staff car and a Humvee were nearby. Hillock pointed to the tactical vehicle for the ride to division.

The officers assembled in HQ were serious, though of course a few broke the tension with brief, tense levity – as they had in Iraqi streets and Afghan foothills. A meeting amid a decaying security situation out in the civilian world and a bitterly contested presidential election were bound to be a lot more than a routine inspection.

Colonels Thackeray, Grierson, and Valsen had held meetings with the troops in their battalions and felt out friends and colleagues at Bragg and at other divisions in CONUS, but no one knew what would happen when Hillock got there. None of the three knew exactly what they’d do when Hillock gave his orders. Afghanistan and Iraq required them to develop adaptability and innovation. They had that working for them. They brought their service .45s.

“Ten hut!”

General Hillock, General Keating, and the adjutant walked briskly to the podium. He’d changed into camouflage fatigues with four stars on the lapels and the Centcom patch on both shoulders. He looked out into the room for a moment until he gauged

the mood and commanded their attention. Then he spoke in a loud deep voice that required no microphone.

“At ease, brave soldiers. Many of you I know have served with me. Others I will have the honor of serving with for the first time on this momentous day. We are all aware of the dire situation in America. We’ve all seen the reports of the breakdown of government and paralysis that has befallen us. Unfortunately, America’s enemies do not face these dangers and they will act where they will – Eastern Europe, Central Asia, the Far East. Cities and states have been talking of leaving the union for many months. Now, they are moving forward with secession and we must hold the union together.

“Unless someone takes charge in Washington . . . gentlemen, our nation and the world will be the worse for it. Our nation and the world will be the worse for our inaction. And history, I fear, will judge us harshly for it.

“We’ve all gone over the Operation Renew America plans for securing Washington in January, after the election, after the inauguration. We cannot tarry until that time. We must act sooner. Gentlemen, we must act now. The 82nd Airborne Division led the way in North Africa, Sicily, Normandy, and Holland. You will lead the way again in restoring America to greatness and to its destiny in world history. Your orders are to secure the White House, Capitol, Supreme Court, and all approaches to Washington, DC, especially the Potomac bridges. Fuller information on transport and logistics will be at battalion headquarters within the hour. God bless each of you, and God bless America.”

Hillock looked at the officers gathered before him who'd listened in surreal silence to his words and to his orders. He saw men nodding confidently in the front row and began to praise himself for his oratory and demeanor. He was a leader of men and destiny had placed him in this room and in this nation at an auspicious hour.

Looking deeper into the rows of seated officers, he saw more than a few impassive faces, questioning faces, and a few rows from the front, three faces with expressions of determination intermingling with what appeared to be contempt. A moment’s reflection made it clear it was directed at him. Several officers were looking back to the three colonels, as though to gauge their response.

Hillock knew it had to be countered immediately. He glared momentarily at the division commander who was puzzled and embarrassed by the absence of spirited assent to the orders, extraordinary though they were.

“Gentlemen,” Hillock spoke slowly and earnestly, “you have your orders. And your nation expects you to follow them – to the letter, and without delay or demurrals. As do

I.” Hillock had first practiced a look of unmistakable authority and unswerving determination at West Point. It had served him well in the thirty-five years since he left the fortress on the Hudson as a second lieutenant and it played no small role in his rise to flag officer. It had never failed him.

“*Gentlemen*, I said you have your orders!”

The division commander looked forcefully to the officers he’d selected for the front row and they began to rise. Hillock was sure this would cue the others to do the same and put Renew America into operation. A few other officer looked about and began to come to their feet when they saw Lt Colonel Wade Thackeray stand and begin to speak.

“What orders are you referring to?”

Hillock was stunned but replied almost instantly. “You are out of line, *soldier!*” Hillock summoned once more his practiced look.

“And you are out of the army, *mister!*”

The division commander intervened. “Now look here, Thackeray. Admittedly, these orders are somewhat irregular –”

Colonel Valsen stood forcefully. “It is *highly* irregular to take orders from a man completely outside the chain of command. It is asking us to violate the oath we took when we entered the United States Army.”

“To defend our country against enemies, foreign and *domestic*.” Colonel Grierson’s last word reverberated through the room and in the minds of those in it. Most of them were no longer taking orders, at least not automatically. There was a dialog underway, one as important for the country’s future as any dialog since 1776 – or perhaps 1860.

Hillock read the name tags on the chests of the three men, just below their Combat Infantryman Badges.

“You listen to me, *Colonels* Thackeray, Grierson, and Valsen. This is not the time or place for puerile theatrics. You have faithfully followed every order right spang from the day you entered the service and since the 9/11 attacks –”

Thackeray interrupted him in heated voice.

“Since the 9/11 attacks we have gotten over seven thousand of the young men and women entrusted to us killed in foreign wars. Do you feel any obligation to them? We

do. I swear to *Almighty God* we do! America's security has diminished over the last fifteen years – under you and your kind. Allies no longer trust us. ISIL and al Qaeda have spread from North Africa to Central Asia due to your obeisance to wrongheaded policies.”

Thackeray was surprised by how pleased he felt barking out these words to Hillock and his acolytes on the stage and in the front row. Words that had been whispered in mess halls and informal gatherings were now being shouted.

“May I remind you, Colonel Thackeray, that the orders for these ‘wrongheaded policies’, as you so *impertinently* call them, came from lawfully-elected and constitutionally-sanctioned officials.”

“And you, and others like you, never objected. Not when the rosy scenarios were clearly absurd – if not *fabricated*. Not when they collapsed into chaos and we and our troops suffered the consequences, day after day, year after year. When the higher-ups are incompetent, and more attuned to think tanks than to history, there has to be more candor from our generals. More courage too!”

“We now at least have candor from our colonels.” The heretofore unheard voice unnerved Hillock. Officer after officer was now rising from their seats and standing with Thackeray, Grierson, and Valsen.

“I could have you all in the stockade – or in front of something far, far worse!” Hillock roared, his face reddening.

Thackeray looked to Grierson and Valsen. They walked determinedly to the stage, unholstered their .45s, and aimed them at Hillock and his acolytes. The silence was broken only by the sound of two hammers being drawn back.

After a few agonized seconds, it was clear that no one was coming to Hillock's defense.

Hillock looked into their steely eyes and saw determination he'd never witnessed or approximated. He saw Combat Infantryman Badges and divisional patches on their right shoulders and felt himself the lesser man for the first time in decades. They'd endured more hostile fire in a month than he'd seen in his career. He was theory, they were practice. He was Baghdad and Kabul, they were Fallujah and Korengal. He was Centcom, they were Bravo Company. They had faced the enemy, they had killed the enemy – Taliban, al Qaeda, Badr Brigades. And in their fearsome eyes he saw an unsettling truth – these men were willing to kill him.

Hillock's mind reeled, his anger grew into near rage. He felt a completely foreign feeling of helplessness which had the effect of deflating his anger.

“You win – for now. This isn’t over. No, by God. There are loyal men out there. There are still loyal men out there. Thank God for that!”

With that, Hillock and the division commander left the building, more hurriedly than anyone expected.

The officers looked at Grierson and Valsen with the same thoughts. These were brave men. Among the bravest they’d ever known and ever could know. Grierson and Valsen eased the hammers down on their .45s.

The officers of 82nd Airborne cheered loudly, protractedly, and sincerely. Concern over what was to come was for another time. Yes, they’d crossed a line but they did so to stop a man who was crossing the Rubicon.

Thackeray wondered if his fellow soldiers had been swayed by constitutional arguments, his personal strength and those of Grierson and Valsen, or anger over the deaths of friends and the prospect of many more. If they all someday wrote down just what was going through their minds that moment, they might not know. But they all knew they trusted Thackeray far more than they did Hillock.

Valsen had kept his phone on. He saw a text from Anthony Sabatini asking for word. Valsen awkwardly typed out a reply. His son could have done it in a few seconds, but Valsen was unaccustomed to texting. “The soldiers of 82nd ABN have, after a frank discussion, disabused a fledgling politician of his more reckless opinions.”

A minute later Valsen received Anthony’s reply. “It’s about fucking time someone did!” He held up the screen to those around him.

One major read the message, then the sender’s name. “Anthony Sabatini? That’s the guy who blew up the Iranian nuclear plant!”

The army come to Washington

Over the next day, Anthony and the three colonels spoke at some length. They no longer cared if they were being surveilled by NSA or DIA or anyone else. At this point, they reasoned that the more people who knew about the Project and Hillock and Operation Renew America, the better off the country was.

82nd Airborne had refused to go along with Renew America. That was clear. The disposition of other divisions was not.

Army field-grade officers are well connected. Not in the sense that Washington politicians would understand the term. It was more an institutional meaning. They had gone to West Point and OCS with fellow officers, served with them overseas, and attended Command and General Staff College and the War College with them. The service overseas was by far the most important in building trust. And trust was what mattered just then as Thackeray, Grierson, and Valsen explained the constitutional perils the country faced. Most were battalion commanders or executive officers and had been briefed about Renew America by one of Hillock's aides or a senior Pentagon staffer. One unit had been briefed by a "slick Washington operative" by the name of Borden Woolfolk.

The three Ft Bragg colonels learned that Renew America was facing resistance in every division. That went for the marines as well. With such internal incoherence, the military was incapable of concerted action. They would stay at home. They would stay at Bragg, Lewis, Lejeune, Knox, and Hood. Probably. They'd know more in the next twenty-four hours. By then they might have succeeded, or they might be relieved of their commands and sent off to Riley for summary courts martial convened by generals and their proteges, after which there'd be swift executions of sentence.

Only one division beside 82nd Airborne had overtly refused to go along with Renew America. That was the one that had been briefed by Woolfolk. The disposition of the Stryker Brigade was unknown. It was placed under a communications blackout a day earlier when it was deployed around Washington, DC – Forts Belvoir and Meade – as

the ready reserve for Renew America. Its commander had served under Hillock for twelve years. Hillock was thought to be shuttling back and forth between the two forts.

Leela and Barrett awoke Sunday morning about nine to buzzing sounds over the Potomac. Barrett stirred and looked out the window but saw nothing. He made coffee in the french press for them to enjoy in bed, and smiled inwardly on remembering that the following morning, they'd fly to New Mexico for a week. The votes were still being recounted and there was little to do at the Project anyway. Word was that regardless of who took office, the Project would shut down. It was coming under scrutiny by the media and Justice Department.

Leela and Barrett were about to head out for the day when the noise came again. It was no longer the buzzing sound similar to lawnmowers or leaf blowers. This was a deeper, fuller sound. Much louder and growing more so. Barrett knew the sound.

“Black Hawks. Lots of them.”

To the south was a swarm of Black Hawks coming in from downriver. They hovered near the 14th Street and Memorial Bridges before rapidly descending and disappearing from the view given by the Envoy balcony.

Leela grabbed her keys and phone. “There’s an observation deck on the roof.”

They dashed to the elevator and saw that neither was moving. Maintenance or a move-in. They ran up six floors of steps and opened the door with Leela’s key. To the south they saw the army Black Hawks landing on three places along the long grassy mall stretching along the river. A loud buzzing sound asserted itself over the distant chopper blades and they looked up to see a small aircraft scream a hundred feet over their heads from the direction of Key Bridge to their north.

“A drone.” Leela murmured lowly. Her heart was racing yet sinking too.

Leela tuned in ANN on her phone, but the anchors were going over the same minutiae regarding the recount that they’d done late last night. Whatever she and Barrett were witnessing down on the Mall hadn’t reached the media.

Down the stairs to the garage, and they were soon racing down Virginia Avenue in Leela’s Cayenne, then turning down a road that ran along the northern edge of the Mall. They mused silently over the street’s name – Constitution Avenue.

One group of Black Hawks landed between the Lincoln Memorial and Washington Monument. Two more were coming down on the green expanse between the White House and Capitol. Platoons were debouching in full battle rattle. Larger, twin-bladed Chinook helicopters brought in Humvees. Their crews raced to them then positioned them at intersections and bridges.

Tourists stepped back from the mall and attractions and watched excitedly at the unexpected display of military might. Cameras clicked and whirred. Children lined up at the concession trucks and bought shirts and hot dogs. It was quite a spectacle.

The deployment continued, methodically and mysteriously, for the better part of an hour. Humvees headed halfway across the bridges and soldiers set up ropes and began to rappel down the sides to supporting beams. A few news trucks arrived and were directed to a command post between the White House and Capitol. Leela and Barrett headed there warily. Barrett saw the 82nd Airborne insignia on the choppers and Humvees.

An officer stood before a bank of five or six microphones. From the distance, Barrett could see the black oak leaf and crossed rifles of a lieutenant colonel of infantry. They walked closer and heard him begin.

“Welcome, ladies and gentlemen. What you are witnessing here is a deployment exercise, albeit one that we were unable to give you proper foreknowledge of. Events sometimes demand that we act more promptly than planned. Elements of the 82nd Airborne Division are conducting this exercise to demonstrate to the American people that we are vigilant, prepared, and determined to protect them and their freedoms – at a moment’s notice – from any danger that might arise, foreign or domestic. That was in the oath we took, and we *will* keep it.”

Cameras snapped and whirred and onlookers applauded. Leela and Barrett cautiously neared the podium and saw Anthony in coat and tie at the colonel’s side. Seeing his friends, he approached them, concern etched on his usually stoic face.

“It’s okay. I think it is, anyway.” He pointed out to the troops positioned across the Mall. “They’re with us.”

Barrett pointed to the soldiers fixing objects to the support arches of the 14th Street and Memorial Bridges.

“Then why are they setting charges to blow up the bridges?”

“Yeah, well . . . Hillock still has some troops on his side over in Virginia. Colonel Thackeray – that’s the man who gave the briefing – is going to meet with the

commander now. He was my CO in Afghanistan one year. Odd thing to see again, isn't it?"

Barrett awaited clarification.

"You know. Rebel troops positioned right across the Potomac. Just like old times."

The parallel had dawned on Leela already. "Ahh. So where's your Colonel Thackeray meeting the rebel commander? Bull Run or Appomattox?"

That evening, ANN ran a story of the 82nd Airborne's "breathtaking exercise" on the Mall. There was call phone footage of Black Hawks swooping down for landings near national landmarks, Col Thackeray's briefing before the mikes, and children posing with soldiers. Camera crews asked PFCs of their hometowns and if MREs were as bad as everyone said. Most said they weren't that bad but opted nonetheless to get burgers and fries from the concession trucks. One shot depicted Col Thackeray pouring water from his canteen into the cup of a picket on Memorial Bridge.

The anchor's face became solemn as he reported a tragic story of a colonel's death at Ft Belvoir, not far from DC, just as his unit was leaving the area after an exercise. It was the commander of the Stryker Brigade – reportedly killed by a self-inflicted gunshot. When asked for comment, Col Grierson, visibly moved, said he served with the man on a training program with Pashtun tribal militias in Kandahar province.

"He was a fine officer. A good man too. He and I had our differences over the years, in and out of uniform, both here and overseas. Still, he always served his country in the manner he thought best. And he did so through most extraordinary times – times we never thought we'd see, and hope never to see again."

"Thank you for your service, Col Grierson." The anchor moved on to the next story which was about the recount.

New Mexico

Barrett, reasonably rested after flying back from Washington, sat in the studio and checked his hair in the monitor. Khadija turned on the audio and the anchor gave a rundown of the latest news on the election before turning to the guest analyst.

Anchor: For the latest on the election we go not to Washington, we go to Albuquerque, New Mexico, of all places. And we have there Barrett Parker who's just back from Washington. Barrett, the recount in Ohio and Florida has been underway for seven days now. Any idea when this thing will be over?

Barrett: The recount is painstakingly slow. The procedure is under close scrutiny – unprecedented scrutiny – by officials of both parties, by the courts, and by concerned citizens in state and local government. We need an accurate recount, not a fast one.

Anchor: For a while there, the military was getting involved in the process.

Barrett: Yes, national guard units tried to take control of the ballots in hotly contested states. However, the courts shot that down – so to speak.

(Barrett knew that wasn't what the anchor was getting at.)

Anchor: Does anyone have the edge?

Barrett: The rural precincts are going even more to Hillock than thought. That's the case in both states.

Anchor: When it's all said and done then, the general may have the presidency.

Barrett: The general may have the presidency but I'm quite confident he won't have his way.

(Barrett regretted his words immediately and searched for an innocent meaning to attach to them before the anchor pounced.)

Anchor: What do you mean by not having his way?

Barrett: I simply mean that with the election this close, Hillock will not have a mandate to make sweeping changes and enjoy a free hand in policy, foreign or domestic.

Anchor: Yes there's been considerable talk of ferment in the military and even talk of unusual troop movements in the days before and after the election. Is America entering a period of military intervention in domestic politics?

Barrett: The military is always conducting training exercises and putting on displays for the benefit of the American public. The army's had a public relations office since World War Two. We only noticed the exercises in recent days because of the political tensions. We're all on edge and we might be seeing things that aren't there. The US is not a banana republic, at least not yet.

Anchor: Is it coincidence that commanders of four infantry divisions have had to retire in the last two days?

Barrett: I don't know that they *had to* retire. There's a new president coming in, whether it's Hillock or Roberts. There's a growing sense in the military, at all levels, that it's time for a change. The four stars have been too quick to acquiesce to misguided wars around the world that politicians – *inexperienced* politicians, I might add – have plotted up since 9/11. It's time for a new blood to take command. And in a few years we'll see this new blood begin to make itself felt in the Joint Chiefs of Staff as well.

Anchor: Since you mention the Joint Chiefs of Staff, what about the reports that two of them will be retiring soon?

Barrett: Sounds to me like the old generation knows its days are up and they need to step down.

Anchor: And what of Reverend Keller's recent outburst?

Barrett: He initially praised the Washington training exercise then denounced it as a satanic act that was taking America out of God's plan. It caused quite a backlash against him, and the media are beginning to look into his sect's influence in the armed forces, especially at high levels.

Anchor: Perhaps the view from here in Qatar is not as acute as it is in your country, but there's suspicion in many world capitals that American political institutions are at their weakest point since the 1860s.

Barrett: There are problems. The American public isn't as engaged in public affairs as in the past. However, vital support for democracy may come from that new generation I just mentioned. Vital support may be coming from sources we never thought possible, at least not until these last seven days.

The anchor was piqued but the segment was running out of time. He thanked his guest, and Barrett nodded and waited for the light on the camera to go out before leaning back in his chair and reaching for his warm tea.

"Barrett, I sense you know a lot more than you're letting on." Khadija was chiding him for the first time in the five years he'd been a guest on her programs.

"You can always get Tony Cordesman. He's better looking than I am anyway."

"Barrett, what in flaming hell is going on over there? All those military movements and retirements. That suicide just outside Washington. The commanding officer of Whiteman Air Force base and a B-2 pilot both found dead, miles apart, with a half dozen .22 rounds in each of their heads. Maybe we're too accustomed to military intrigue and routine praetorianism here in the Middle East, but something's afoot over there. What's going on?"

This was the first he'd heard of the deaths at Whiteman. The use of .22s in both cases was odd. Two outfits came to mind. The mafia used them in their hits. The smaller rounds are quieter and give less recoil to throw off the next shots. Whiteman wasn't any of the mafia's concern. The other outfit was Mossad.

"Khadija, I don't know the whole story, not yet. If I told you what I thought happened, you'd tell me to go work for Oliver Stone. It's been suggested before – and in a less than friendly way."

"Full burkas, huh."

"Have I ever told you how endearing your deadly pan humor is?"

"Many times, Barrett. *Countless* times. Now back to my question, please. How bad is it over there?"

"Not as bad as it was. I truly think it's better than it was a week ago."

“Why Barrett Parker! A glimmer of optimism from a maven of realpolitik. I’m beginning to think you found yourself a girlfriend – or she found you.”

“We found each other long ago, and refound each other in the last few months. It just somehow happened.”

“How romantic! I’m happy for you both. Does she wear Tony Lamas or Luccheses?”

“Her boots? Probably from Prado or Versace. No matter. Where there are women wearing cowboy boots, Khadija, there’s promise.”

“I’ll bear that in mind next time I’m in Dubai, *pardner*. Off to Kelly’s?”

“Not today. I think I’d rather climb the foothills and look out on the world for a while. New Mexico offers a different perspective than Washington does. More people from that town should come out here, at least for a visit if not an extended stay.”

“Enjoy your day, Mr Parker. And one more thing, please?”

“Yes?”

“*Prado* is a museum. *Prada* is a fashion house. It makes, among other things, leather goods.”

“I’ll naturally defer to the belle of the Dubai boutiques. Does Prada make cowboy boots?”

“Oh, Barrett! I doubt it very much. But there’s always hope.”

Barrett sat on the reddish-brown rock and looked out on the dry plains to the east. A gym bag lay next to him as Jesse sat on watch. Temperatures were in the low fifties but the sun was strong enough to warm anything thicker than the air at 7700 feet, and that included people and wolves. Out in the distance a glint would appear as the sun hit a car speeding along Rt 66. He reflected that the mythic highway still had old diners and motels from the forties and fifties that hadn’t yet lost out to modern chains and franchises.

Leela, pleasingly attired in jeans and an oatmeal Aran island sweater, sat slightly behind him, waiting. Waiting for the right moment, an opening. None would come when he was simply looking out to the horizon, so she spoke up.

“Barry, why did you bring the pistol to Washington?”

How did she know about Peter's .45? His travel bag must have been suspiciously heavy. Privacy? Well, he was staying at her place. House rules.

"Thought I might shoot Walton Ambrose Hillock, if the chance presented itself. Another fellow and I talked about it. He's pretty handy with a rifle and could easily off someone with a scoped fifty a mile or so out – say, from a hi-rise overlooking Ft Myer. Depending on the wind, of course."

Leela shuddered at the words and her imagination raced frighteningly on seeing there was no breeze rustling the cedars around them just then. Jesse looked at her warily.

"We decided not to. Lots of reasons. We didn't want to become the latest deranged killers on the media hit parade. You know, confused guys who claimed to be saving the country but who were duped by Russian propaganda. That's how ANN would package the deal. The rest would run it pretty much the same. And a dangerous generalissimo would be a martyr, with his death a rationale for what we hoped to prevent in the first place. Operation Remember Hillock, coming to a capital near you."

"You said there were other reasons too."

"Yeah. . . ." His voice became louder and angry. If hikers had come by, he wouldn't have lowered it a bit. "We figured if America's democracy is so goddam weak as to need a guy with an old pistol or a sniper rifle to preserve it . . . well, it won't stand much longer no matter what they did. The American people have lost all interest. They just haven't lost all control. Not yet anyway. They've been given another chance. American democracy has been saved – not by the wisdom of the people or by the grace of God or by lone wolves. It was saved by a cohort of colonels who've seen enough. The founding fathers feared a standing army. Said it was the engine of despotism. Well, Jefferson and Madison and Hamilton, the army's the only thing holding up the democracy you brought us."

"I'm afraid it's true. Everything the American people hold dear – or claim to – has been saved by people they don't know, don't see, don't invite to parties, and don't understand. That's it. That's the new American democracy. Not what Woolfolk and the Project had in mind, though."

"Another reason I didn't shoot Hillock. . . ." His face became calm, gentle. Surprisingly so. "I'd never be able to come up here and feel free and unlimited with anyone."

Leela leaned against him and he placed his arm around her. They looked out to the horizon, toward Moriarty.

“What’s going to happen to Thackeray, Grierson, Valsen, and the others? They’ve put their careers and more on the line, and only a few of us know it.”

“I doubt they know what will happen to them and I’m certain that, unlike me, they act on principles, not on consequences. They might be passed over for promotion. Up or out, you know. They have all the ribbons and OERs and schooling to make it to the major leagues, but bureaucracy doesn’t much cotton to people who act outside channels. Not the army, not the Project, not the 4-H Club for that matter. Maybe the change of generations around them will protect them; maybe it’ll take ‘em to the top. Hope so. Then again they might be hanged as mutineers out in Kansas or shot from long range as they walk through a parking lot.”

“Oh, God. I hope not. I certainly hope they come out of this alright. We could write up what they did and let it be known. I’m not sure if that would protect them or further endanger them, though. Nobody’s paying attention anymore. Not even in the land of the free.”

“What happens to them and the country is a matter for coming years to decide and we will have the opportunity to watch those events unfold, or not, from a quiet vantage point.” He looked over to his gym bag. “Leela, my love, ever heard of Calvados?”

Leela cocked her head to one side. “An apple brandy from northern France. Calvados. It’s named after the village in Normandy where it’s made, if I’m not mistaken. Legend says the village in turn was named for a Spanish Armada ship named *Salvador* that beached nearby when the Channel gales and English ships struck.”

Barrett reached into the bag and removed a bottle and two glasses. “You are rarely mistaken and you are not now. Your reward is a generous sampling of the aforementioned drink. It’ll help ward off the chill on this November afternoon.”

“Barry, don’t take this the wrong way, but how did you come to know about an exotic French brandy?”

“My old friend Peter Novotny liberated the village of Calvados during World War Two. The grateful villagers thanked him and his boys of Company G, 3rd Armored Division, by giving them generous amounts of their gift to the world.”

“Why, Barrett Parker. You can be such a thoughtful and sentimental guy, at times. I’m told you even did volunteer work at a tutoring center on the South Side of Chicago. True?”

“I suppose. Just don’t let it get out. Military analysts are supposed to be hardboiled.”

“Who’d believe it?”

“Just you, just you.”

Barrett poured each of them a few ounces of the amber beverage. They started to clink glasses but Leela pulled back.

“What shall we drink to on this portentous occasion, my hardboiled but covertly sentimental friend.”

“Let’s drink to Peter Novotny – and those like him.”

“Yes, to Peter Novotny – and those like him.”

They clinked glasses and took each other in. They sipped the Calvados and felt it warm their insides, as light faded and temperature fell on the eastern slope of the Sandias. The wolf took notice and enjoyed what he saw.

Time to head back. Lying down on the Khamseh rug near the adobe fireplace sounded welcoming. Four feet and four paws padded down the deer trail toward the two-lane blacktop leading to Barrett’s home. He steadied her as she walked uncertainly in her new boots.

“I meant to ask where you got your cowboy boots, my Iranian-American partner.”

“Prada, of course. Maybe you’ll get yours there someday.”

“I doubt it, Leela. I surely do. But there’s always hope.”