

PART II

Nine

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Mason laughed.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Ten

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

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

Matt looked confused.

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

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

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

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

“Longer than his dick,” Jim mumbled.

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

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

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

* * *

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

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

* * *

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

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

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

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

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

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

They were all *women*.

* * *

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

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

Mason paused to take a bite of his burger.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Quinn remained silent, but he was obviously unsatisfied.

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

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

"And that works?" Matt asked.

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

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

Tara's head suddenly snapped up.

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

* * *

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

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

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

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

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

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

Happiness.

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

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

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

Eleven

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The men all leaned forward slightly.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Twelve

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Tara turned up the television.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The scene shifted back to the anchorman.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Thirteen

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Fourteen

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

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

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

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

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

* * *

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

* * *

“Story!” Danny yelled, clapping his hands.

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

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

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

“Why?” Danny asked.

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

“Are they bad?” Danny asked.

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

“Oh.”

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

“Why?” Danny asked.

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

“Are they bad?”

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

“Oh.” Danny looked confused. “Why?”

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

“Okay.”

Fifteen

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

* * *

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Sixteen

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

* * *

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

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

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

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

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

A car approached them from behind.

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

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

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

* * *

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

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

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

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

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

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

Seventeen

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

* * *

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

* * *

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

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

“All teams in place,” the operator said.

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

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

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

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

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