

PART III

Eighteen

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Yes,” Mason answered immediately.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

* * *

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

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

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

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

“He had back luck,” Matt explained.

Nineteen

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

"Miller," he said, still drowsy.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

* * *

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“General Riggs,” Greene said, turning his attention from Miller, “what’s happening with our troops?”

“Nothing, Mr. President.” Riggs tried to restrain a smirk. “So far none of the newly liberated natives—and none of the female cops with nets—has challenged our installations. A few ‘Yankee go home’ demonstrations are underway, but that’s standard fare for these people.”

Twenty

“Hurry up, Danny!” Tara yelled. “We don’t want to miss the subway!”

Danny reluctantly dropped the shell on the ground and scurried back to his parents and Mason.

“Why exactly are we rushing?” Mason inquired. He preferred leisurely strolls, especially when he saw no rational argument against them.

“Because it’s a holiday,” Tara reminded him. “The trains don’t run as often. I don’t want to get stuck waiting at the station for fifteen minutes.”

“I’m not sure I follow you,” Mason informed her. “Are you suggesting that by walking faster, we will reduce the expected waiting time at the platform?”

Here we go, O’Toole thought, looking at his watch. He didn’t care what happened, so long as they got to Broadway before ten. The parade (commemorating Minerva’s ten-year anniversary) started at noon, and the streets would soon be impossible to navigate.

“David, what *are* you talking about?” Tara asked.

“The subways come at a certain, regular frequency, yes?” Mason asked her.

“Yeah, about every fifteen minutes. It’s a holiday,” Tara reminded him again.

“Quite so,” Mason agreed. “Now then, do you know when the next train is arriving?”

“No,” Tara answered, growing impatient with the old man. Sometimes he could really be thick! “That’s why we’re rushing.”

“But how do you know,” Mason persisted, “that the next train isn’t arriving in, say, thirty seconds, so we have no hope of catching it? And that therefore we are rushing, only to wait *longer* at the platform? Yes, the greater interval between successive trains makes it that much worse if we just miss the next one. But it also means there is a lower probability that we *will* just miss the next train, since they run less frequently. In the absence of further information, I think the two effects cancel, and that we should walk at the same speed we would on any other day.”

Tara didn't say a word. She was often wary of answering the man's challenges, since she always suspected that he himself didn't believe them.

"I gather that I haven't convinced you," Mason said after a few moments of silence. "Let me try it this way: If we hurry, we can reach the station in about five minutes. But if we walk normally, we can reach it in about ten." Mason ceased talking long enough to catch his breath. "You believe that it is better to hurry and reach the station in five minutes, rather than walking and reaching it in ten."

"Ok-a-ay," Tara said. She looked down at Danny and made an exasperated face. He giggled.

"Now what if I were to tell you," Mason said with growing excitement, "that this morning I set ahead your clocks and watches by precisely five minutes. Would you then agree with me that we should slow down?"

"David," Tara said, ashamed at herself for actually glancing at the clock on a nearby bank, "*did* you change our clocks?"

"Of course not," Mason answered. "I'm just trying to show you the absurdity of your stance. Clearly you didn't think, a moment ago, that your position relied upon the fact that it is now 9:38 rather than 9:33—"

"Leave it to an economist," Tara said to her husband, "to start an argument with a false assumption. But you're right," she said, now to Mason. "Danny, come over here."

What a nightmare, O'Toole thought, looking at his watch. Tara had led Danny by the hand to a small patch of grass in front of a pastry shop.

"Sit down, Danny," Tara said, pulling out a sandwich from her purse. "Since we have so much time, we're going to have a picnic!"

"Yay! A picnic!" Danny clapped his hands and obediently plopped his bottom on the grass.

O'Toole sighed and looked at Mason.

"Why?" he asked rhetorically.

As Danny munched half of his peanut butter sandwich, O'Toole hailed a cab.

* * *

“Okay,” O’Toole said, looking at the brochure. “Danny, your mother and I are giving a speech at noon, so you’re going with Professor Mason to the space exhibit.”

“Okay,” his son answered, without turning his head from the window.

Daniel normally would be enthusiastic with this news; he was absolutely fascinated by the rockets that went up almost weekly from the launch pad a few kilometers off the western coast of Minerva, carrying satellites or scientific experiments from countries all over the world. But Daniel was currently fixated on the platforms outside the subway glass. He was (mentally) extending a metallic pole from the subway car onto the current station’s platform. As the subway pulled away from the station, it was Daniel’s responsibility to lift the pole and hold it elevated until he could rest it at the next station. Failure to do so would result in the destruction of the pole, as it smashed against the wall of the corridor rushing by.

“Okay,” O’Toole continued, “so you guys will probably be tied up till about two. What are we doing after the speech?” O’Toole asked Tara. “I’m rather interested in the bubble cities.”

Although eased by the acquisition of Lotos, the population problem continued to vex the Minervans. It would soon be profitable to construct floating neighborhoods on huge barges off the coast, offering impeccable security and privileged living space to the wealthiest citizens.

“B-o-o-ring,” Tara moaned. “Who cares about tomorrow’s suburbs?” She snatched the brochure from O’Toole. “I’m surprised you didn’t vote for the desalination plants,” she teased, looking over the day’s options.

“You might try the submarine exhibit,” Mason suggested. Although Minerva’s dominance of the computer and communications industries was expected by everyone, most had been surprised at the innovations in submersibles. “They actually take you out to sea and show off some of the latest model’s features.”

“Nope,” Tara vetoed, not looking up, “I get claustrophobic in those things.”

“They make them very big now, Mom,” Daniel informed her, though without shirking his duty of hoisting the pole protruding from their car.

“If the island isn’t big enough for your mother,” Mason said, “I doubt a submarine would be.”

“Oh, I should really make an appearance at the Drake exhibit,” Tara said, still looking over the brochure. She wasn’t fond of the controversial painter, and thought his work too crude to warrant the title “Minervan art.” But she didn’t quite understand it, and so wanted to give it another chance.

“B-o-o-ring,” O’Toole said, knowing full well he would be attempting to interpret nonsensical brush strokes later that afternoon.

* * *

“Gimme a cotton candy and a plain black coffee,” O’Toole said to the vendor.

The vendor first retrieved the cotton candy, and handed it over the counter to Tara. Then he filled a styrofoam cup with steaming coffee. He picked up a spoonful of sugar and brought it near the cup.

“No sugar!” O’Toole said.

“No sugar?” the man asked.

“No sugar.”

“You want milk?” the man asked helpfully. He even held up the container of milk to make his meaning clear.

“No milk,” O’Toole answered. No matter how hard he tried, he could not convey to vendors that “plain black coffee” meant plain black coffee.

The vendor gave the man his change and smiled as the pretty couple walked away, the man with his coffee and the woman with her cotton candy. In his four years on the island, he had learned that human nature was the same here as in Manhattan: It was always better to ask, in order that irate customers wouldn’t come back two minutes later demanding sugar or milk in their coffee.

* * *

“The lobster bisque, please,” Danny told Mason. It was fortunate for his parents that the seafood farms around Minerva made lobster as plentiful as tuna, for Danny had developed quite a taste for the exquisite.

As the old man and young boy walked down the street, carefully eating the hot soup, Mason resumed his lecture.

“Now Daniel, you are only a few years younger than our society. In many ways, your life itself reflects Minerva. Like you, it is currently young and small, vulnerable to all sorts of dangers. But it will grow up to be mature and strong, the most powerful in the world.”

“Like me?” Danny asked.

“Yes,” Mason said after a moment’s consideration. “Like you.”

“Where are we going?” Danny asked a little while later. He had noticed that the throng of celebrants had thinned, and the street was as deserted as could be expected on Minerva.

“We’ve got some time before we meet your parents,” Mason explained. “I want to show you the docks where the immigrants land.”

“That’s a bad place,” Danny informed him. “We shouldn’t go there.”

Mason laughed.

“It’s true that the crime rates are higher there than in other parts of the island,” he told the boy. “But I’m sure we will be in no danger.”

As they walked, Mason marveled at how resilient ancient prejudices were, the fear of the unknown. Even though the steady stream of immigrants was the lifeblood of the fledgling island, most of its residents scorned the newcomers.

* * *

The audience roared as O’Toole stepped back from the microphone and waved. Tara took his arm and they walked off the stage.

“I didn’t realize we were such celebrities,” O’Toole said to his wife.

“No Peter,” Tara corrected him. “*I’m* a celebrity—‘the richest woman in the world,’ and a looker to boot. But *you* are a legend.”

“You’re kidding,” O’Toole said.

“No, I’m not.” Tara stopped and turned to him. “Peter, if you could only *see* the way people in the audience looked at you. You’re a god to these people.”

* * *

Mason and Danny watched as the dirty, tired people shuffled off the boat and onto the pier. Agents from different insurance companies called out in various languages at the immigrants, trying to convince them that *their* temporary policies were by far the fairest.

One man kept his twin daughters close to him as he eyed the onlookers. Although Mason and Danny couldn't have known it, the man had fled his native country after his wife had been raped and killed by soldiers. On the cramped ship to Minerva, he had cut his daughters' hair to make them less attractive. The father was quite wary of the promises of employment and housing offered by the man in a Western suit at the table, though the suit's perfect dialect was a point in his favor.

"Where are they going?" Danny asked, as several Reliant officers escorted a group of twenty or so men in orange clothes into a company van.

"They have to go to a special holding area," Mason explained.

"Why?" Danny asked.

"A government somewhere declared that they were criminals, and shipped them here," Mason said. "So they are kept in buildings designed to hold them, until they can prove their trustworthiness and build up a deposit so that someone will insure them."

"Oh," Danny said.

Darrell Holmes eyed the old man and boy as he leaned against the moving company's van. He had no idea what the odd pair were doing, but the old man had on a funky suit that suggested money.

Darrell, a clever seventeen-year-old from Detroit, had moved to Minerva only three months before. He had been amazed by how far just a few days' work unloading cargo would go on the strange island. Of course, the housing situation was ridiculous; Darrell had opted for a bed in a dormitory that was far more crowded than any military barracks that his friends back in the States were suffering through. But besides that, just

a few days on the dock was enough to pay for decent meals and nights at the bar for the rest of the month.

Now that he'd gotten a feel for the place, though, Darrell had stopped going to his dock job. As was true in any big city, the real money in Minerva went to those with a little brains and a lot of balls. At first Darrell had been at a loss to break in to the action: you could walk into the local pharmacy and buy a kilo of cocaine, for Chrissake. But soon enough, Darrell had hooked up with Larry and Michael. They had had a pretty sweet deal, working for the moving company on paper but making their real money in between jobs. Whether it was fencing stolen property, getting an immigrant a new identity, or smuggling in weapons that were illegal even in Minerva, the three of them could always find something to do on their way back from a job.

And when the three guys had nothing lined up, they could always count on an opportunity presenting itself at the docks.

Danny slowly eased his head to the left, trying to examine the three men without letting them know it. Mason had noticed them as well, and led Danny down an alley. It was broad daylight, and Mason wanted to let them pass so he could stop his foolish worrying.

Darrell snorted. When they had followed the pair from the docks, Darrell didn't really think anything would come of it; he was mostly just curious what the hell those two were doing, gawking like tourists in this section of the city. But c'mon, if the old man was going to just *hand over* his stuff, then Darrell would obviously take it.

"Let's make this quick," he said. He scanned the street quickly before the three boys ducked into the alley.

When Mason saw the three teenagers turn the corner, his stomach collapsed. He mentally reviewed his possessions, which fortunately were not that valuable. But he was utterly humiliated at the situation in which he had placed Danny, and it was entirely his own fault.

“Okay gramps, hand it over,” Darrell said, raising the gun slightly, but keeping it inside his jacket pocket.

Something about the young man’s tone *irritated* Mason. It was the same...*smugness* that so infuriated him in the classroom. Mason would much rather have a student cheat on an exam than scoff at him during a lecture, thinking he knew more than the professor. Mason momentarily forgot all about Danny.

“I will do no such thing,” Mason answered.

Darrell snorted. He pulled out the gun and pointed it out Mason’s chest.

“I’m not fuckin around old man,” Darrell said. “Give me your gold...and that watch.”

Mason’s eyes left Darrell’s stare to glance down at the watch, a gift from his niece. The very *idea* that he would give it up to some *punk* who had no conception of its value to him!

“Let me tell you something, young man,” Mason said, his eyes once again returning Darrell’s stare. “I know you’ve been taught that the world owes you something, but I assure you, it does not. You think that because your great-grandfather was a slave, that gives you the right to point a gun at me? Well my *father* wasn’t enslaved, he was *cooked*. But you know what, young man? I shrugged it off, worked two jobs, and got a Ph.D. So go point your gun at someone else; I don’t owe you a thing.”

Darrell was stunned. Was this guy fucking *nuts*? Holmes took a step forward and swiveled the gun, now pointing it at the young boy’s head.

“I said, give us that watch,” Holmes repeated.

When the youth had pointed the gun at Danny, Mason imploded with rage. He was *furios* that this coward, rather than answer his arguments, would choose instead to threaten a child.

Knowing that the solution to a large problem often consisted in its reduction to smaller chunks, Mason looked at the other teenagers. They were clearly nervous at the escalation.

“How long have you gentlemen even *lived* here?” Mason asked. “You don’t understand how this society works yet, do you? Well let me give you a quick lesson:

The petty violations of the rules laid down by insurers? That's no big deal. No one really cares about that, which is why you haven't been caught and punished. But do you really think Reliant is going to allow an eight-year-old boy to be *gunned down* in broad day without finding out who did it?"

Mason paused, and saw that the two teenagers were interested in his comments. He also knew that the leader would not pull the trigger, at least not yet.

"When Reliant officers swarm the docks, asking if anybody noticed us, and offering a hundred ounces for anyone who can provide details leading to a conviction, do you really believe that no one will remember you fellows? Hmm?"

"Finally," Mason said, pointing his finger at the two followers, one after the other, "do you two really think it's wise to become accessories to murder because your friend here wants to prove he's a man? Do you think he'll admit to the Reliant detectives that it was *he* who shot the little boy, or is it just possible he'll sell you two out for an offer of immunity?"

This last move was a definite gamble; Minervan justice typically didn't feature plea bargains. Since most crimes were punished by large fines, an offer of leniency in exchange for a confession was seen more clearly for what it essentially was: bribed testimony. To protect their reputation for integrity, most arbitrators wouldn't accept cases in which the plaintiff had paid the financial obligations of an admitted criminal, especially if the other defendants were insured by rival carriers. In situations like those, no matter how solid the evidence, a ruling for the plaintiff would appear to outsiders as a purchased verdict.

Nonetheless, Mason could see that he now had the upper hand, and decided the risk was worth it. The three thieves were almost certainly newcomers from the U.S.

"C'mon Darrell, that watch is a piece a shit anyway," Larry said, backing away from the situation.

"And now I know your name," Mason said to Darrell. "So you'll have to shoot both of us." Mason turned to the other two. "If you boys run now, you can honestly tell the Reliant officers that you were long gone when the shots were fired."

Something about the old man's tone frightened Larry and Michael; it seemed that he *wanted* to provoke Darrell. What had started out as a tactic of intimidation might now

end up as a double homicide. Larry was the first to turn and run, which prompted Michael to quickly follow.

Darrell raised the gun, aiming it between the old man's eyes. He rotated his wrist and held the gun sideways. Its barrel was less than a foot from the man's face.

"Move away," Mason instructed Danny, pushing him back with his left palm. Danny, eyes wide with fright, took a few additional steps backward into the alley.

"Now it's just us," Mason whispered to Darrell.

"I don't know what you're up to," Darrell said slowly, "but I've still got the gun. And you're giving me that watch."

"You really don't know what I am, do you?" Mason hissed. He took a step forward, pressing his forehead against the gun.

"Old man," Darrell started, shaking his head slowly in amazement, "I really don't want to blow your fuckin head off in front of the kid, but I will. *Give me the watch.*"

Darrell's mind raced. He decided that he would wait another three seconds, and after that he would pistol whip the crazy bastard and take the watch and whatever else he had on him. The street had been empty, but that had been several minutes ago. No telling who might walk by any—

The old man began laughing. It was a low, *sinister* laugh, borne of complete and utter confidence.

"What more am I going to have to show you, boy?" the man sneered. "Do you really think an old man with his grandson would act like this?"

Mason took a step forward, forcing Darrell to back up. He kept the gun planted firmly against his forehead.

"Back up old man," Darrell said, his voice lower than before. "I swear to God, I'll shoot you right now."

"Of course, they always bring *Him* into it," Mason said with a chuckle. "But in my experience, young Darrell, I've found that your God will allow me my fun. He has yet to interfere when I encounter a worthless wretch like *you.*"

Darrell's stomach fell, and his knees buckled. His deep confusion had now given way to mounting fear.

"I'll...do it," Darrell said.

“Oh, wouldn’t that be a shame?” Mason said with cruel sarcasm. “Then I’d have to find a different body. And I was *so* fond of this decrepit shell. Oh *please* don’t evict me, young Darrell.”

What the fuck?!? Darrell’s mind screamed.

“Don’t you get it yet, boy!” Mason growled. Darrell took a step back. “Don’t you know a DEMON when you see it?!”

Darrell’s mounting fear was now full-fledged terror. He really didn’t understand what was happening, but suddenly his pride didn’t require sticking around for the old man’s watch. At this point, Darrell honestly did not give a flying *fuck* what people would say if they knew he’d come out of the mugging empty-handed.

“I know everything about you, young Darrell,” Mason said, walking forward. Darrell matched his steps by moving backward, toward the street. “I know how things were back in America, and I know why you came here. And yes, I know how you used to look at him. No Darrell, I don’t think that makes you a *faggot*, do you?”

Darrell was now more confused than ever. Was the man talking about Bradley? Sure, Darrell had always admired his abs, but it wasn’t anything sexual. Was it?

“GET OUT OF HERE!!” the man suddenly screamed. Darrell turned and ran, faster than he had ever run in his life.

Once the boy had turned the corner, Mason’s body began to quiver. He fell to his hands and knees, and broke out in a cold sweat. He glanced over at Danny, who was staring at him without emotion.

Ashamed, Mason quickly looked away. He reflected on the terrible things he had said, and was certain that Tara would never speak to him again. His eyes welled with tears, and he began to vomit on the street.

Danny stood still, watching the professor throw up. He hadn’t been able to hear much of what the professor had said to those robbers, but he had certainly shown that nigger who was boss.

Twenty-One

Steven Peckard looked at his watch quite deliberately as Tom Brady entered the room and hurried to the only remaining seat at the table.

“Mr. Brady, I trust you didn’t have another run-in with the ladies of Reliant?” Peckard asked. The room chuckled. Brady just smiled.

“Gentlemen,” Peckard officially began, looking over the group of elegantly dressed Minervan powerbrokers, “I want to thank you all for coming. I’ve been consulting with most of you for several years now, and I’m sure most of you have interacted with each other in the past, but I thought it would be helpful for us all to get together in the same room and talk.”

“One well-placed bomb and the CIA could sleep at night,” Paul Kennedy cracked. Some of the men laughed.

“That’s a very valid concern, Mr. Kennedy,” Peckard answered, with no amusement. “I assure you, I have had the finest security teams assembled for the protection of my own person, as well as my company and its assets.”

Peckard paused and pulled out a manila folder. He walked over to Kennedy and placed it in front of him.

“Your joke is rather ironic,” Peckard continued, “inasmuch as no fewer than four of your Railworker union members are CIA informants.”

The grin vanished from Kennedy’s face, and the other men became very still.

Peckard retrieved fourteen more manila folders, and placed them in front of the respective men.

“My counterintelligence agents have discovered CIA infiltration in each of your respective firms or unions,” Peckard told the men. “Gentlemen, we have to get serious. You can no longer concentrate solely on higher dividends for your investors or better dental plans for your workers. With the incorporation of Lotos into Minerva’s legal and economic framework, we are now presenting a very real threat to the major governments of the world. We can no longer afford to ignore them. I assure you, they are not ignoring us.”

Peckard returned to his seat. He waited several moments for the men to review the dossiers in their folders.

“How did you obtain this information?” asked Drake Skinner, current head of the Barons, an elite association of airline pilots.

“This first pass was simple enough,” answered Peckard. “Indeed, without having access to your records, my agencies could do little more. They simply matched the observable lifestyle choices of a random selection of your members—what they drive, where they live, what schools their children attend—against our estimates of their income. When large discrepancies were found, we investigated more closely. The dossiers in your folders are by no means exhaustive; I just want us all to admit that we have a problem.”

“And what exactly do you want us to do about it?” asked Kennedy. “Have all my men sign a loyalty oath?”

“Of course not, Mr. Kennedy,” Peckard answered, annoyed. “After all, spies are not averse to lying. But what I have done in my own company, and what I urge each of you to do in yours, is conduct a thorough housecleaning with an eye to security. There is no shortage of excellent consultants in these matters; you have all been provided with a list of my personal recommendations. They can help you identify the points of vulnerability in your organizations, and the steps you can take to remedy them in our so-very-open society.”

* * *

“Those of you who were involved in the Lotosian invasion know that, at that time, I favored a very aggressive strategy, which,” Peckard said with a slight smile, “turned out to be rather effective. However, in the present situation, I think we must avoid open battle with the industrialized powers at all costs. I’m sure Mr. Kraft and Hutchison agree with me.” Peckard nodded at the heads of Carecoe and Prudence, Minerva’s insurance giants.

“Are you expecting an attack?” George Ribald, newly elected president of the Minerva Militia, asked.

“Not at the present time,” Peckard answered. He could see the relief on several faces. As he had hoped, the CIA informants had scared the men. They now seemed much more trusting of his guidance.

“As I’m sure you all know,” Peckard continued, “the United Nations has passed fifteen resolutions to date condemning certain unsavory practices on our fair island. Now any one of these issues—whether it’s child prostitution, narcotics, or money laundering—would probably be enough to whip up the enfranchised masses of the world into a war frenzy. But before that happens, the U.N. will have to go through the motions: They’ll slap us with embargoes, then sanctions, then a full blockade, before they can start dropping bombs.”

“Tom, are your boys up to a fight?” Ribald asked Brady.

“Against pirates? Sure. Against the U.S. Navy? Hell no.” Brady had been urged by several of his subordinates—notably Mark Johnson—to arm more of their fleet. Inasmuch as they wanted him to do so simply because he *could*, he had decided against it. But it was probably time to rethink that decision.

“Well, as I said before,” Peckard said, trying to cheer up the table, “there won’t be an attack anytime soon. And Mr. Feynman’s *ingenious* legal maneuvers will probably get the U.S. occupation forces off of Lotos in a very diplomatic way.”

Edward Feynman smiled. He himself hadn’t realized the pleasant side effect of his negotiations with Lugar until after the deal was done.

“Real estate prices are now almost as high in Lotos as they are here in Minerva,” Peckard explained. “My guess is that within the next five years, the Marines won’t be able to *afford* their occupation. Granted, they’ll undoubtedly station a carrier nearby, but I cannot stress how much the Lotosian coup has helped us.”

“So what’s the plan, then?” Ribald asked, becoming impatient. “We just fire our traitors, then sit back and let the problem fix itself?”

“Not exactly,” Peckard said. If nothing else, the blue collar types got to the point. “We need to make sure that the United States and any other imperialist powers realize that a war against Minerva would be prohibitively costly. As the entire world now knows, any *ground* assault would be disastrous; no army will ever take the island.”

“But that still leaves air and sea,” Ribald objected.

“True enough,” Peckard admitted. “And to that end, I personally have already taken some timid steps. Over the past two years, I’ve invested a few million doll—several thousand ounces in R&D for surface-to-air missiles, antiship cruise missiles, coastal mines, and so on. In conjunction with Mr. Maynard,” Peckard paused to nod at the CEO of GemStar, the industry leader, “we’ve even deployed a few prototypes of reconnaissance and combat satellites.”

“Gentlemen, please relax,” Feynman interjected as the murmurs grew louder. “I have worked closely with Mr. Peckard at each step of the way, to ensure that all of this is perfectly legal.”

“As I said,” Peckard resumed, “what we have accomplished so far is rather preliminary. In order to mount a true deterrent to a U.N. coalition, we will need to invest hundreds of millions of ounces over the next decade.”

The murmurs returned. “I just laid off fifty people.” “Are my *competitors* investing in missiles?” “How do we even know what we’re buying?” “I suppose *you* will oversee the investments?”

“Gentlemen,” Peckard said, holding up his hands. “We’re not asking you for contributions.” The murmurs died down again. “But at least now we all understand the situation. At this point, I’ll turn it over to Mr. Kraft.”

The Carecoe executive nodded.

“Working with Mr. Feynman’s firm,” Kraft began, “Carecoe and Prudence have developed a new type of insurance policy, designed specifically to indemnify the holders against losses sustained as a result of foreign military attack. As our existing policies expire, we will gradually phase them out so that our companies are *not* liable for such losses unless the new policies are purchased. Consequently, we will be able to isolate the specific monetary damages foreign militaries threaten us with, and we will charge our customers accordingly.” Kraft paused to let the men grasp the idea.

“What this means,” he continued, “is that we will also know how much *preventive* or *defensive* measures are worth, in terms of gold ounces. So for example,” Kraft said, looking at Skinner, “if the Barons recruit a few fighter pilots, and patrol Minervan air space, our company will gladly reimburse your efforts, since this type of investment will

more than pay for itself in lower compensation claims from our customers. The same idea applies to the arming of merchantmen,” Kraft said, now looking at Brady.

“It may not take off for a few years,” Kraft said, “but once the West becomes openly belligerent, Carecoe and Prudence will be taking in millions in premiums on military policies. There is currently a huge, virtually untapped market for security. I believe we can supply that market. All we need is public awareness of the danger, and some expert consultants. If we all work together, we can prevent another war.”

“And make ourselves a little richer in the process,” Peckard added with a chuckle. “What could be wrong with that?”

Twenty-Two

Mason looked around the glorious apartment. Tara had originally wanted an actual house, but O'Toole had convinced her that it would be too extravagant. Instead, they had purchased three consecutive floors near the top of the Trump Tower. The middle floor had been removed, and the near-cube had been completely renovated to form a luxurious loft, enclosed on all sides by windows offering a view of the entire island. The O'Tooles' home had been featured in countless articles and television spots.

Tara emerged from the upstairs room, and softly padded down the winding staircase. Mason could barely make eye contact.

"It's okay David," Tara said softly. "It wasn't your fault. And Danny's fine."

"You feel better, tiger?" O'Toole asked. Danny nodded, his head still buried in O'Toole's shirt.

"Now Danny, I want you to listen to me," O'Toole said. He gently pushed his son's shoulders and tilted his head up to face his own. Danny wiped his snot-filled nose with an arm.

"Everything turned out O.K. today, and your mother and I are very glad that no one was hurt. But next time, if you ever find yourself in that situation, *give up your money*. Don't ever fight someone over something as stupid as your wallet. As you get older, you'll see that the easiest thing in the world is making money. All you need to do is open your eyes, and you'll see nine different ways to become rich. But if someone hurts you, or worse, no amount of money can take that back."

Danny nodded his head, but then burst back into tears. O'Toole let him bury his head once again in his father's soiled shirt.

Especially in light of the day's events, O'Toole was more confident than ever in his position regarding the family's money: O'Toole felt that they should donate the great bulk of it, and *publicly*. Especially if Danny ended up going abroad to study, O'Toole felt it was imperative to eliminate the appeal to kidnappers.

Tara would never allow the type of security that would ease O'Toole's mind; she believed, probably rightly, that a boy shouldn't be surrounded by bodyguards while growing up. The only solution, to which Tara hadn't yet agreed but would probably now come around to, was for the O'Tooles to give away their wealth. Once they had done that, perhaps O'Toole could sleep peacefully. He would even have the homing chip removed from Danny's arm, hopefully without Tara ever realizing it had been there in the first place.

"I don't know why you would think that, David," Tara said in response to Mason's concerns. "Yes, I disagree with you on just about everything, but I certainly *respect* you. I wouldn't leave Danny with you otherwise."

"Oh," Mason said, stunned. "I suppose I just thought that you viewed me as...crazy."

"Why?"

"Well, your review of my book..."

"Oh, *that?*" Tara said with a laugh. "David, I was still in college! I knew before I even opened it that I was going to trash your novel. But in the grand scheme of things, it was a wonderful book."

"Really?" Mason asked.

"Of course. You have a lovely mind, David. I couldn't write the sorts of things that you do. Not that I'd necessarily *want* to, mind you."

"Well, I never realized that," Mason admitted. "You know, I feel the same way about your work. I couldn't write the way you do, and often I wish I could."

"Oh David," Tara said, "I don't need a *quid pro quo*. I know you're above gossip columns."

"I'm not talking about your recent work," Mason said, without irony. "Back when you wrote for the *Verdict*. That was genuinely brilliant writing."

Tara blushed.

"And I must tell you," Mason continued, "the most amazing play I have ever seen, was a low-budget production in the Village, and written by a young Tara McClare."

"Which one?" Tara asked.

“I don’t remember the name, but it concerned the crucifixion of Jesus.”

“Oh, *Trial by Jury*,” Tara said and nodded.

“Yes,” Mason recalled. “It was unbelievably bold, the way you tricked the audience. At the climax, I looked around me, and just about everyone was shouting, ‘Crucify him!’ at the top of his lungs. And they weren’t only shouting it...they were really *angry* at the arrogant man. They wanted him to *pay* for his self-righteousness. I’ve never seen anything like it.”

* * *

“Again, I cannot express to you how sorry I am for this,” Mason said as they waited for the elevator.

“David, it’s okay,” O’Toole reassured him. “Say, anyone know what time it is? Oh! You’ve got a watch.”

Mason smiled. O’Toole was a genuinely decent human being.

After he had seen Mason off, O’Toole returned to the kitchen where Tara was brewing tea.

“Guess what?” she asked.

“What?”

“David said that he thought one of my college plays was the most amazing one he’d ever seen.” As she said this, Tara didn’t even look at her husband. Instead, she stared off into the distant ocean.

“No kidding,” O’Toole answered. “I’m going to check on Danny.”

O’Toole tried not to sulk as he climbed the stairs. He constantly praised Tara’s work, yet she had always pooh poohed his compliments and pointed out the flaws in whatever she had written. O’Toole had always thought this was because Tara was a perfectionist, but now he realized it was simply that she didn’t consider him a very good judge of talent.

Twenty-Three

“Gretchen, another round of drinks...for all my friends,” Matt said, doing a decent impression of Mickey Rourke from *Barfly*.

The others at the table—as well as the poor waitress, no doubt—were relieved that he had, apparently, finally dropped the jokes concerning fairy tales from the brothers Grimm. Matt always felt the need to dwell on any female server’s name, in order to (a) appear as if he really cared about the girl, but more important (b) drive home the name in his own head. In his present state of inebriation, Matt could come up with nothing clever to say regarding *Gretchen*, and so instead exploited its weak similarity to *Gretel*.

“King, isn’t it about time for you to take another piss?” Chris Nook inquired. “I mean, *I* just pounded a beer, so I bet your bladder has the heebie jeebies.”

“No,” Matt said, after a moment’s reflection, “but I just pounded your mom, and my *dick* has the heebie jeebies.”

Matt took a large sip, and accidentally made eye contact with the young blonde who had been staring at him for the last forty-five minutes. She was far from attractive, and the two other porkers at the table were even worse. The fourth member of their table was a small, unassuming guy, probably the blonde’s boyfriend.

Seizing upon the spurious invitation, the blonde stood up and began walking toward the table.

“Oh shit,” Matt groaned. “Okay everybody, make like we’re in suspended animation.”

“Now let her down gentle,” Jim insisted.

“Of course,” Matt said in astonishment. “What sort of prick do you think I am?”

“Um, sorry to interrupt,” the blonde said. She had halted her approach a full five feet from their table. “But my friend over there thinks you’re cute.”

Matt simply could not help it. What the fuck could you expect with *that* opening??

“Well that’s ironic, cuz I hear that *that* guy over there likes his women like he likes his bakeries.”

“Wh-what?” the blonde asked.

“Full of rolls,” Matt explained, finishing his beer. He really did need to piss.

“Um,” the blonde persisted, obviously emboldened by the alcohol, “she wants you to go talk to her. I think you’d really like her.”

“What, does she have a gap in her teeth?” Matt inquired.

Apparently, Matt had been unsuccessful in filtering the sarcasm from his tone; at this point, even the blonde suspected foul play.

“You’re just really an asshole, aren’t you?” she suddenly demanded. “You could’ve just said you weren’t interested, but instead you have to sit there and try to make me feel like shit.”

““Try?”” Matt objected. “And anyway honey, all I’m doing is one-tenth of what you bitches pull all the time.”

At this point, Jim and Quinn were looking away from the confrontation. Nook was thoroughly enjoying it.

“You think just because you’re good-looking, you can treat people like shit.” The blonde paused, searching for a succinct illustration of the invalidity of this strategy. “But you can’t.”

“Oh boo hoo,” Matt responded. “Honey, the only reason *you’re* nice is that you weren’t graced with a set of killer tits and a tight ass. You’re pretty ugly, so that’s why you’re pretty nice. You have to be for anyone to associate with you.”

The blonde did not answer for a few moments, although it was clear that she did not fully endorse Matt’s claims.

“Fuck *you!*” she yelled, stomping her foot. A few people at the bar turned to watch the discussion.

“All right,” Matt said, feeling the growing urgency in his bladder. “Hey pal,” he called out to the boyfriend, “you wanna curb your dog?”

* * *

“Bullshit,” Matt said, “that would never work. There must be more to the story.”

“That’s what Tara told me,” Quinn responded. “I agree, you’d have to be crazy to try it, but I suppose it could work. That kid didn’t have time to think it through; it just happened.”

Quinn had just related the implausible events surrounding the attempted mugging. (As he often did when drinking, Quinn had called Tara.)

Several moments passed, while the men—now heavily drunk—pondered the tale.

“Okay, I’ve decided,” Quinn suddenly announced.

“You’re going through with the vasectomy?” Matt asked.

“I’m definitely buying the ship,” Quinn continued, ignoring Matt. “I’ve been talking with that guy I mentioned, and it looks simple enough. They tell you where to load up, and they tell you what route to take. When you get to Minerva, they unload it for you and pay you in gold. All you do is bear the risk.”

“What sort of risk are we talking about?” Jim asked.

“Well, apparently ninety-five percent of the ships that head for Minerva get through. But that counts everybody, even the independent guys who aren’t hooked up to the satellites. And a lot of them also have older ships.”

“What about the people with new ships, who *are* hooked up to the satellites?” Matt asked. This didn’t sound like such a stupid idea after all. It was just glorified drug dealing, really.

“Well,” Quinn said, with skepticism, “my guy claims that only one ship with the proper equipment has been caught. And my guy says it was the captain’s error. To hear my guy talk, it’s the easiest thing in the world to steer a boat clear of the Navy ships, if you’ve got an ocean to work with and you know exactly where all the ships are.”

“You’ll definitely need to check those figures out,” Jim warned.

“Of course,” Quinn agreed. “But, assuming it all looks good, what do you guys think?”

“Arrr,” Nook said, affecting a pirate accent. “First Mate Nook reportin’ fer duty, Captain Red Beard.” Nook had resurrected Quinn’s old nickname, from the days when he had been dating Tara.

“Arrr,” Matt said without missing a beat. “Me rank is Seaman, and I search the seven seas for young boys to add to me crew.”

“Arrr,” Nook responded, trying not to laugh. “Seaman King, load the aft torpedo tubes!”

Quinn looked at Jim, who shook his head sadly.

Twenty-Four

“...but to answer your question,” Alex Maynard, CEO of GemStar, said to George Ribald, “yes, we have redundant firepower. Even if the U.S. were to launch a preemptive strike on our killer sats, we would still retain enough retaliatory force to take them all out.”

“And how long for you to achieve space superiority?” Ribald pressed.

“Well, it depends what you mean,” Maynard responded. “With our jamming birds, we expect to totally knock out coalition communications within five minutes. But depending on the time of day, it might take us anywhere from several hours to over a day to actually destroy the hardware in question.”

“I still say this is crazy,” Tom Brady said, already knowing that his protests were pointless. “The U.S. didn’t need satellites to nuke Hiroshima.”

“Oh come now, Mr. Brady,” Edward Feynman said. “The coalition wouldn’t *dare* use nuclear weapons in response. We’ve got a solid thirty-percent of the First World agreeing that the blockade is inhumane. We can’t be faulted for taking steps to import food for our children.”

“Your PR teams can spin it however they want,” Brady said. “The fact is, we will fire the first shots. No matter what happens from that point on, this will be the war that *we* started.”

“And what of it?” Peckard asked, finally returning to the discussion. “It doesn’t matter who starts the war; what matters is who finishes it.”

Brady didn’t bother replying; he merely shook his head and left the room. Brady knew that he would be outvoted by a large margin; his abstention meant nothing at this point.

As he paced in the observation room outside, Brady wondered how it had come to this. Each step of the way, he had taken what he thought the prudent course of action. When Peckard had formed the Defense Trust two years previously, it seemed perfectly sensible. Brady had become aware, just as the others had, that their loose arrangement didn’t make economic sense; certain obvious expenditures weren’t undertaken, simply

because the relevant party didn't stand to profit from it. In that light, when Peckard and his carrion, Feynman, had proposed the Trust, they sold it as a mere accounting gimmick to pool their assets and share the benefits of their collective defense spending. It was supposed to be just an extension of the non-binding arrangements with Carecoe and Prudence.

But once the coalition forces stepped up their blockade, Peckard's attitude began to change. He was no longer content with deterrence; he started running computer simulations of missile strikes on the U.S. and British vessels. For some reason, Peckard no longer wanted to rely on ever faster blockade runners, and more sophisticated tracking of coalition ships. No, now it seemed all Peckard wanted to do was *attack*.

Unfortunately, there wasn't much Brady could do about it: He was contractually locked in to the Trust for seven years, and most of the other voters were sheep who would follow Peckard's lead.

* * *

"Yes, that's right," Maynard said. "It's a pity Mr. Brady had to leave us, because he could offer some insight as well. But suffice it to say, we will have plenty of oil tankers ready to steam in the moment the blockade has been broken."

"This might be stupid," Paul Kennedy said, raising his right arm but only lifting his index finger, "but how would our space attack look from a legal angle? I mean, can we be *sued*?"

"That's an excellent question, Mr. Kennedy." Feynman rose from his chair. "Yes, the U.S. federal government, just to take an example, has legal standing in Minervan courts, and the Pentagon satellites are its recognized property. So if and when the Trust's satellites destroy them, the Trust will be liable for that damage.

"However," Feynman continued, "the U.S. federal government is *also* liable for the hundreds of ships, including their cargo, that its naval vessels have impounded. Right now there are thousands of merchants who have actionable claims against the U.S. government. Of course, most haven't bothered to launch legal proceedings, since there's little hope for compensation. So what the Trust will do, if it comes to it, is buy up claims

at a fraction of their face value, until we have more than enough to cover the monetary damages from our attack. In this way, there'll be no question that the Trust's actions are perfectly legal."

"And now gentlemen," Peckard said, sensing that there were no further questions, "the most important part: How does the Trust make a fortune from all of this?"

The room chuckled.

"Assuming that everyone here keeps his mouth shut, we will be in the quite fortuitous position of being the only people to know precisely *when* the blockade will be disrupted. Consequently, the Trust will invest a large fraction of its assets in put options on commodities such as oil and livestock. And, just as I personally did during the Lotosian conflict, the Trust will also invest heavily in real estate calls. Naturally we'll diversify our holdings across a spectrum of relevant commodities, and of course we won't make ourselves *too* reliant on the timing in case something comes up, but..."

Peckard paused and swept the room with a grin.

"...I expect the Defense Trust will have a very, very profitable quarter."

Twenty-Five

“Are you sure you want to do that?” Mason asked Danny.

“You said I should control the center of the board,” Danny answered, being careful to keep his finger on his Knight.

“Yes, but I also said you should keep your extended pieces protected,” Mason reminded him. “That Knight is guarding your Bishop. Do you intend to remedy that with your next move? Don’t forget about him.”

“Whatever,” Danny said, looking hopeless. He moved his Knight back. “What should I do?”

“It’s *your* move, Daniel,” Mason snapped, “so *you* must decide!”

Danny moved his Rook, placing it in the path of Mason’s Knight.

“Fine,” Mason sighed, “if you don’t want to play, we can stop. But...look at me, Daniel,” Mason commanded.

Danny looked at Mason.

“...but don’t for one minute feel sorry for yourself. You lost because you made inferior moves, and you did that because you didn’t think them through. It doesn’t matter how much older I am, Daniel. My pieces follow the same rules as yours, and I’m starting down a Rook. You have the ability to beat me, Daniel. But you never will until you believe it.”

“Yes sir,” Danny mumbled. “I have to get ready for bed now.”

* * *

“Why do you always go there?” Danny asked.

“Because it’s the only place we can all agree on,” Tara answered. “There’s gambling for Dr. Mason and the guys, and entertainers for your father and me.”

“Can you tell me a story before you go?” Danny risked.

“Aren’t you getting old for stories from mommy?” Tara said, smiling.

“No,” Danny said, his mind racing. “I want to hear a Tara O’Toole story. Even grownups like her stories.”

“Okay,” Tara said. “Get in bed.”

Tara lied on top of the covers after Danny settled himself. She was pressed for time, and so returned to a tested formula.

“It was a dark, stormy night, and Scientist Blue had just made a discovery,” Tara began. She saw Danny smile with anticipation.

“Scientist Blue had finally perfected his elixir,” Tara continued. “It would almost instantly dissolve bullets and heal gunshot wounds. The war with the Reds was causing terrible casualties, with hundreds of Blue soldiers dying every day. So Scientist Blue took his formula and rushed over to notify Major Blue.

“When he arrived at his office, Scientist Blue told Major Blue about his discovery. But the Major got angry. ‘Dammit Scientist,’ he yelled, ‘We paid you to work on the laser cannon!’

“‘But my elixir can save thousands of our troops!’ the Scientist protested. ‘If we mass produce it, we can win the war!’

“‘Don’t tell me how to win the war,’ the Major yelled. ‘And what good are our troops if they’re still using bullets when the Reds have laser beams? I’d trade 10,000 boys for one laser cannon any day. Besides, you don’t even know if that stuff works.’

“‘But of course I do!’ the Scientist pleaded. ‘I’ve tested it on primates of all kinds. If you give me the word, we can start treating the wounded in the hospitals.’

“‘Are you crazy, Scientist?’ the Major yelled. ‘Do you really think I’m gonna let you experiment on my boys, who are out there fighting every day, with your monkey juice?’”

* * *

“Hey, is Jennifer Heyden working tonight?” Matt asked the pit boss. Regardless of the answer, he could still ask every other hot employee he encountered. It was a great way to break the ice.

“No, I think she’s in tomorrow,” the man answered as he took down Mason’s information. He had no idea who Jennifer Heyden was.

“Damn,” Matt responded. “If I’m gonna lose another twenty ounces, I at least want some great jerk-off material.”

“Better luck next time,” the pit boss said, before walking away. The money was certainly better on the island, but the crowds were even raunchier than in Vegas.

* * *

“So it was easy?” O’Toole asked.

“Piece a cake,” Quinn answered. “It was like buying into a franchise: we make a down payment, they give us the ship and cargo, give us a training session, and tell us where to take it. We got there with no trouble at all—didn’t even *see* a U.S. or British ship—they unloaded the stuff, and filled us back up for the return voyage. We just need to make one more roundtrip, and the boat’s ours. After that, we keep all the profits.”

“You pay for the satellite feed?” O’Toole asked.

“Oh, right, we pay for that. But that’s just a cost of doing business, what with the blockade. It’s like paying for fuel.”

“Sure,” O’Toole said, nodding. “Look, if you don’t mind me asking, how experienced are you at sea?”

“Oh me?” Quinn said and laughed. “I’m not much of a sailor. But I picked up two extra guys. Both served in the Navy, or maybe the Coast Guard. So they know what they’re doing.”

“And how many of these trips do you plan on making?” O’Toole asked.

“Well,” Quinn said, leaning back in his chair, “we were playing around with numbers just the other night. I figure if we make another three roundtrips, we can sell the ship and all retire as very, very wealthy men.”

“Do you know there’s another carrier coming?” O’Toole asked. “And the Europeans are really beefing up their domestic interdiction; you could get picked up just trying to load your cargo. How well do you know the people telling you where to go?”

“Well,” Quinn said, “I don’t really know them at all. But I hardly think they’d give us this brand new ship—you gotta see this thing, it’s a beaut—and then hand us over to the French police. Besides, we’re not going to Europe at all.”

“Oh no?” O’Toole said.

“Nope,” Quinn answered. “I’d tell you where, but I don’t want to compromise security and all.”

O’Toole snorted and finished his beer. Quinn just stared at Tara’s husband.

He sure doesn’t like the idea of another self-made man coming along, Quinn thought.

* * *

Oh don’t hit you stupid motherfucker...

Matt watched with horror as the man in the Sonics jersey hit his thirteen while the dealer showed a Four of Diamonds. The dealer placed a Ten of Clubs on the man’s hand and took his chips.

“Good job, chief,” Matt groaned. “Wouldn’t want to miss out on the suspense.”

Matt slid out the chips to double down on his initial twenty-ounce wager. He had been dealt an eleven.

“Oh someone sodomize me now,” Matt said as the dealer placed a Five of Hearts on his hand.

Mason stayed on his seventeen. The dealer flipped a Seven of Spades.

“Great, fuck me with a *black* cock why don’t you,” Matt mumbled.

The dealer drew a Two of Diamonds from the shoe.

Oh baby oh baby oh baby, Matt thought. He had lifted his butt from the seat without realizing it.

The dealer drew a Seven of Hearts. Matt sat back down.

“Th-it th-it th-it that’s all folks,” he said and stormed away from the table. He headed for the bar.

Moments later, Mason joined him.

“Matthew,” he said, “I told you to reduce your bet size. The percentage of your bankroll was far too high.”

“Yeah,” Matt agreed. “Note to self: Next time, cut your bets in half, and fuck yourself for twice as long.”

Mason sipped from his martini.

“I can’t *believe* that stupid fuck,” Matt said. “I’d have eighty ounces right now if it weren’t for that dumb prick.”

“Oh come now, Matthew,” Mason said. “The man was a fool, to be sure, but you can’t blame your failure on others—at least not in Blackjack.”

“Oh boy,” Matt said. “Now you’ll tell me that guy did me a favor, right? Like, if it weren’t for him, I’d be down eighty ounces *plus* my balls would shrivel.”

“Matthew,” Mason said firmly, “you have a fine mind and it breaks my heart to see you waste it.”

Matt suppressed his sulk.

“A foolish player ahead of you is just as likely to help as to hurt you,” Mason explained. “If the two top cards of the shoe had been reversed, his play would have saved you. But I daresay you wouldn’t have remembered that nearly as much as you’ll remember tonight’s incident.”

“Guess we’ll never know,” Matt said, “since that guy certainly fucked me. But I’ll be sure to think back fondly on the prompt bartender.”

* * *

“How’d ya do, Cap’n?” Matt asked Quinn as he and Mason approached the others at the designated time.

“I dropped about five quarters at the tables, and another at the bar,” Quinn answered. “You?”

“Oh, you know,” Matt said bitterly, “I was up eighteen at one point—and I’m talking full *ounces* here, not quarters—and walked out down sixty-two.”

“Ouch,” Jim said, “you *are* stupid.”

“So I guess I’m definitely in for the next ocean jaunt,” Matt said, sitting down next to Tara on the bench.

“What about you, beautiful?” he asked. “Find any replacements for the wind-up husband?”

“No,” Tara said, “but I’m still looking.”

Everyone stood up as the ferry approached the floating casino.

* * *

“Aww, there’s no place like home,” Matt said, staring at the advertisement hanging on the subway station wall. Two women were drinking beer that two men were pouring over the chest of a third, topless woman. The ad read, “BRAMMS: GOES DOWN SMOOTH.”

“That’s just great,” Tara said. “I’m glad to see exploitation is alive and well in Minerva.”

“I hope you are referring to the drinkers who may be misled into preferring beer over martinis,” Mason said. “Those women are certainly being paid quite well for their pose. And notice that their faces are hidden, so they needn’t squirm in church.”

Here we go, O’Toole thought.

“You never cease to amaze, good Doctor,” Tara said. “The ad shows us that women are only important for their boobs, and that, to you, is proof of the company’s decency.”

“What else are women important for?” Matt asked Quinn, keeping his voice low so as not to disturb the professor.

“Oh Tara,” Mason sighed, “now you’re just behaving as a red-headed cliché. You certainly have the ability to discredit male chauvinists, but for some inexplicable reason you choose to prove their point.”

The argument was interrupted by the approaching subway. Unlike systems in other cities, the subway cars in Minerva were actually linked together in giant, elongated rings, one for each line. When the ring for, say, the local B line moved, that meant every car on the line moved with it. In consequence, the timetables were incredibly accurate.

The rings were arranged concentrically, with the express lines in the interior. The ring on an express line would move through roughly ten percent of its perimeter in between each stop, while the outer, local rings would stop every fifty meters or so. By wisely choosing lines, a passenger could usually reach any ground location on the island within fifteen minutes. Also in contrast to most cities, the subways in Minerva were clean and comfortable, so that even its wealthiest couple would ride them, rather than cutting short an evening out with friends who did not normally take helicopters home.

“Can you honestly sit there,” Tara said, after everyone had been seated on the plush benches, “and tell me that society doesn’t exploit women?”

“It would depend,” Mason answered, “on your definition of *exploit*. But I will say that whatever ‘exploitation’ is suffered by women, is suffered much worse by men.”

“Ha!” Tara exclaimed. Surely David was just putting on a show for the crowd at this point.

“Amen!” Matt yelled. “Preach it brotha!”

“Please specify your complaints, Mrs. O’Toole,” Mason challenged.

“Where to begin?” Tara said. “How about the fact that from the moment they’re born, girls are given Barbie dolls and anorexic role models? If a girl doesn’t have an anatomically impossible figure, she feels guilty just eating.”

“Fair enough,” Mason said. “But the male role models are *truly* impossible to emulate. Little girls play with Barbie dolls, but little boys play with Superman dolls; I daresay the latter sets a more formidable standard.”

“Oh please,” Tara said, “everyone knows that Superman is a fantasy. But girls are led to believe that they can really look like the women in swimsuit magazines if they just diet and exercise enough.”

“But they *can*!” Mason exclaimed. “The *models* are able to look like the models, are they not?”

Matt laughed out loud at this point.

“I must confess,” Mason said, “that the feminist whining on this matter disgusts me. Can you imagine a man complaining that professional football is an exploitive institution, and that all-star athletes should quit because their achievements hurt his self-esteem? Can you possibly *imagine* a man making that argument?”

“That’s right David,” Tara said, “ignore the issue by making an analogy. Just pretend that there really aren’t girls dying from eating disorders.”

“Pardon me while I sob,” Mason said. “Mrs. O’Toole, ‘society’ also ‘expects’ young men to march blindly into machine gun nests whenever political rulers tell them to. ‘Society’ ‘tells them’ that if they don’t, they’re cowards and sexually undesirable. So what happens? Every year thousands if not millions of young men are butchered in wars caused by evil politicians. So you’ll forgive me if I don’t shed a tear for the depressed sorority girl who puts a finger down her throat.”

The group remained silent for a few moments. They had never seen Mason become so emotional during an argument.

O’Toole noticed three people at the other end of the subway car. They were stealing glances at O’Toole and Tara. O’Toole realized that they had recognized the couple.

This recognition was becoming a growing problem. O’Toole had been approached three out of the last four times he had left the apartment. Especially in bars and restaurants, people were constantly thanking him and asking for his autograph. O’Toole suspected that tonight’s relative peace was only due to the imposing presence of Quinn and Knight, whom the masses had no doubt mistaken for surly bodyguards.

I’ve got to do something about this, O’Toole thought, and surveyed the rest of his group. Matt was resting his head on his knees, while the others stared out the window, eyes glazed over with drowsiness. O’Toole seemed to be the only one aware of the now gawking fans.

Twenty-Six

Vice President Anthony Black tried to conceal his disgust as he surveyed the room. This was the first time he'd met with this particular group of incompetent, overpromoted kiss-asses, and the circumstances were not pleasant. With Carson gaining in the polls, Lympman couldn't miss his photo ops in California. Consequently, Black had to endure the briefing with the "experts" on Minerva.

The attack needed to be handled delicately; done right, it could be turned to their advantage. But it could just as easily blow up in their faces in November. Initially, the plan had been to let Adams split the Republicans, drawing the votes from all the militia nuts and Bible thumpers, leaving Carson with only the moderates. But now that the crazy bastards had launched an attack, it would definitely provoke a backlash against Adams, whose campaign was literally financed (and this would certainly be leaked by the Carson campaign) by right-wing extremists from the island.

The first priority, of course, was to firmly place the blame on Greene. It had been *Republicans* who sold out the piss-poor natives to big business; that's how the catastrophe got started in the first place. Nonetheless, the voters were nothing if not forgetful: there were plenty of people who would vote against an incumbent just because the country had been attacked during his watch.

"So what are you telling me, General?" Black interrupted. "We can't do *anything* for two months?"

"Well," Riggs said, a bit flustered, "I wouldn't put it like *that*, Mr. Vice President. My men are working *furiously* to revamp our systems—"

"Right right, because the Tomahawks are supposed to be satellite-guided," Black interrupted yet again. "Can we just lob a few over there anyway, in the meantime?"

As Democrats, the president and Black had to take great pains to appear strong on national security. The voters would give a Nixon or a Reagan time to develop a proper counterattack, but not the current administration.

“Well,” Riggs said, afraid of another interruption, “we certainly *could*, but we’d be just as likely to hit a hospital as an airfield. I’m not sure how that would play on the BBC.”

Holy *shit* did Black hate generals!

“Thank you for the extemporaneous analysis, General Riggs, but the way these things work, you answer my technical questions, and I and the president will worry about the media.”

Black took a moment to think. Riggs was right; the only thing possibly worse than doing nothing was to kill a bunch of school kids with an errant bomb.

Black decided that this situation was serious. The last thing in the world he needed was to inherit a war in his own first term. He therefore had to start from scratch, and truly understand the situation. And *that* meant challenging the corner into which the Pentagon wizards had painted themselves.

“Let’s back up a moment,” Black finally said. “I understand why we don’t just land Marines...these sadists aren’t afraid to blow off teenagers’ kneecaps. And yes, General Riggs, that wouldn’t look good on the 6 o’clock news.

“But we’re talking about two tiny islands, right? Can’t we just set up a perimeter of ships and starve them out?”

Black was getting excited about his idea; it would be like a medieval siege.

“Well, that’s basically what we *have* been doing, Mr. Vice President.” Riggs chose his words carefully. “But the islands actually have fairly sophisticated submarines and missile systems. We’ve reached a sort of equilibrium with them, where we don’t press too close, and they don’t interfere when we seize a merchant ship.”

“So what you’re saying,” Black summarized, “is that the diameter of our perimeter is really big, and what should be a blockade is really a sieve?”

“Yes,” Riggs answered.

“How many people are on these islands?” Black asked after a moment of thought.

Riggs opened his mouth but did not speak.

“For permanent residents on both Minerva and Lotos,” Ryan Miller volunteered, “our best guess is 1,370,000. But now that the aerial and naval blockade has been

disrupted, the actual number of people on the islands at any one time will be significantly higher, since there are hundreds of thousands who ‘commute’ to work there.”

“Okay,” Black said, thinking. “So now can you please tell me,” Black asked Miller, “why we’re having so much trouble? If I’m not mistaken, San Diego has more people. And it seems to me that the U.S. military could handle San Diego without a crisis.”

“With all due respect, Mr. Vice President,” Miller answered, “that’s not the best comparison. Minerva is not a typical city. To give you a simple example, they don’t have any mechanism for combating inflation. So speculators can drive the price of essential items up during a blockade, and there are no laws to stop this. Now, it may not be good for their economy as a whole, but it definitely keeps thousands of smugglers around the word risking their lives to supply the islands. With any other country, General Riggs’ blockade would have brought them to their knees months ago.”

“That’s right,” Riggs said. This Miller wasn’t so naïve after all.

“Keep talking,” Black said.

“We can’t freeze their assets, since they rival New York as a banking center. You also need to remember that the majority of Minerva’s exports are electronic in nature: software, financial services, data storage and processing. Since they control the satellites, we can’t stop them from earning foreign exchange to pay for their black market imports.”

“Okay,” Black said. “So they have inflation and pesos. That doesn’t tell me why our Navy doesn’t move in.”

Miller paused for a moment to let Riggs answer, but saw that the vice president was still looking squarely at him.

“Well,” Miller began, “it’s my understanding that the Minervan fighter jets are equipped with superior air-to-air missiles. It’s not clear how our Navy fighters would fare in a dogfight situation. Up till now, our ships and patrol aircraft have respected a 200-kilometer radius from the islands. Their own defensive patrols, as well as informal communications with us, suggest that, at least for now, the Minervans are content to give us that. We have reason to believe, though, that they would retaliate with force if we pressed much harder.”

“Fine,” Black said, “so we keep 200 kilometers away. How many miles is that?” he asked.

“Around 125,” someone answered.

“Okay,” Black continued, “so we keep our boys 125 miles off the coast. I still don’t see why we don’t surround them and starve them.”

“It’s a question of resources, Mr. Vice President,” Riggs said. Black continued to look at Miller.

“What the general is referring to,” Miller explained, “is that there’s a lot of ocean to cover. Since the smugglers are generally using ships faster than our frigates, we actually have to set up a perimeter around 150 miles out, in order to give ourselves room to stop a runner when we spot him. So right there, that’s almost a thousand miles to cover. We’ve currently got two carrier groups, one on the east and one on the west side of the island. But again, you have to understand the tremendous advantage their control of the satellites gives them. They can watch our ships and patrol planes in real time. Even when we stop a ship, there are fifteen others slipping through the gaps created when we converge.”

“And why is it,” Black inquired, “that smugglers have faster ships than the United States Navy?”

“They’re not *all* faster,” Riggs offered. “But over the years they’ve gotten much better. And they don’t load them down, either. They’ll send a dozen ships with light cargo rather than a standard merchantman.”

Black thought.

“In light of the new developments, there will be no difficulty in sending more ships. What if we deployed two more carriers, General? Could you accomplish your mission *then*?”

“We would certainly intercept more vessels,” Riggs said. “I would like to think that the islanders would realize they were beaten, but who can say with people like this?”

“What do you think?” Black asked Miller. “Will squeezing harder do the trick?”

“Absolutely not,” Miller responded without hesitation. “They’d just shift to heavier air and submarine smuggling. In fact, even if we dispensed with boarding, and just sank blockade runners on sight, the island wouldn’t fall.”

“And why is that?” Black asked. He was glad the boy had brought up the hindrance of boarding and seizing the runners; that had been one of Black’s next questions.

“They’re largely self-sufficient in terms of necessities,” Miller said. “They’ve got huge seafood farms, plenty of desalination plants, and several nuclear reactors for power. They don’t have many cars, and virtually no heavy industry, so they don’t need much oil. I’ve already mentioned that what they produce, they only need electricity, computers, and their brains to make. They’re also incredibly wealthy and ingenious; whatever else they truly need, they’ll either pay to smuggle in, or they’ll invent a substitute.”

“Makes me wonder why we don’t all move there,” Black snorted. This Miller sounded more and more like he was infatuated with the enemy. Black had seen this sort of thing before, especially in the Bureau. Piss-broke agents would eavesdrop on mobsters for months, monitoring their spending habits and the starlets they screwed, and end up admiring them. It was disgusting.

“You mentioned submarines,” Black recalled. “Why don’t we send in twenty of them, have them surface off the coast, and take out their airfields?”

“Actually, Mr. Vice President,” Riggs answered, “their airfields are separate from the islands themselves. And we have every reason to believe they’re heavily protected by minefields as well as their own submarines.”

“Let me guess,” Black said, “their submarines are better than ours?”

“Broadly speaking,” Riggs said, obviously prepared to receive another insult, “no sir, they are not. But they do have sophisticated torpedo systems, and would be quite challenging in combat.”

“You seem to have all the answers,” Black said, again looking at Miller. “Please tell me why the United States Navy has to worry about the submarines of some piss-ant island. How much do we spend on our submarines?”

“That I can’t answer,” Miller said, “but you have to keep in mind, the *only thing* the Minervan subs need to do, is detect attacking subs and fire torpedoes at them. They don’t need to go on six-month patrols to the Middle East, or carry around ICBMs. It’s the same with their fighter jets. They’re not nearly as versatile as, say, an F-14, but they don’t need to be. All they have to do is get their missiles close enough to fire.”

“And how do we know all this about their weapon systems?” Black asked. He had grown quite suspicious of CIA “intelligence” during his career.

“Well, we looked at their manufacturers’ brochures,” Miller answered, trying not to chuckle. “There’s no secret as to *what* we’re up against; we just aren’t sure how *many* items they’ve purchased.”

“Well then,” Black said, “if you’re telling me their missiles and torpedoes are better than what we use now, why aren’t we buying from them? I suppose because their firms wouldn’t sell to the Pentagon?”

“Actually,” Miller answered, “it would certainly be possible to get any number of units, perhaps through somewhat roundabout channels. But the initial designs were made to be incompatible with Western platforms.”

“Plus,” Riggs said with a hesitant smile, “it would look bad, buying from the enemy.”

And also there wouldn’t be any kickbacks or consulting spots for the generals, Black thought. But the whole issue was moot, since Black doubted that the enemy equipment really was superior. He had learned that military planners were always full of reasons why something couldn’t be done.

“What about our base on the bigger island?” Black asked after a few moments of silence. “How many men do we have there?”

“We still maintain about 500 Marines there, for peacekeeping purposes,” Riggs answered.

“And nothing’s happened with them?”

“So far, nothing, Mr. Vice President. Of course they’ve been on high alert since the attack on our space-based resources, but, as I say, nothing has changed on the ground.”

“You’re supposed to be the expert on their ‘law’?” Black asked Miller, who nodded. “What would happen if we airlifted 50,000 troops onto the bigger island?”

“Well, where would you put them?” Miller asked. “There’s not room at the current facility. And when you say ‘airlift,’ do you mean booking a regular flight, with passengers who just happen to be soldiers? Or do you mean flying U.S. military planes in, without getting prior approval from their air traffic controllers?”

“I’m not sure what I mean,” Black snapped, “since I don’t understand how the fuck we got into this spot. Yesterday Lympman has me speaking to seniors, and today I’m supposed to figure out our response to a laser attack that nobody saw coming.”

The men squirmed as Black stared into space.

“Okay Miller,” he said, “let’s say we book plane tickets for our troops into the country. What happens?”

“Well, nothing, so long as they don’t have M-16s. Those aren’t acceptable carry-ons. But to answer your broader question, I don’t think anything would happen until our troops actually broke laws. Of course, if it came down to shooting, they’d be completely surrounded, and we couldn’t supply them.”

Black thought.

“What do you recommend we do?” he asked Miller.

“Condemn the attacks in the harshest possible terms, seek financial redress in the Minervan courts, and remind the world of the continued violation of U.N. resolutions. Wait a few months, then cite the hardships on the Minervan children as we phase out the blockade, limiting it only to weapons and narcotics.”

“That’s not going to happen,” Black informed Miller. “What’s your second recommendation?”

“Nuke them,” Miller said immediately. The men were startled.

“Oh?” Black said, a smile curling on his lips. Perhaps this Miller had some balls after all.

“It’s the same as playing at the casino,” Miller elaborated. “Given that you can’t win in the long run, and given that you have to play at all, then the only thing to do is bet it all on one hand.”

“And why can’t we win in the long run?” General Riggs demanded. It was true, they couldn’t win with their hands tied, but these piddly islands were a far cry from Normandy.

“What do you expect them to do?” Miller asked. “Do you really think all of their banks will volunteer customer records to the U.N.? Do you really think their laboratories will allow inspectors to walk in? Even if the public wanted it, there isn’t any group that *can* surrender.”

“Didn’t you miss the Lotosian fall?” Riggs pointed out.

“Yes, I failed to predict that,” Miller admitted.

Black sat back and thought. Now that he understood much better, he was intrigued by the whole situation.

Twenty-Seven

“For someone who walked him into a mugging,” O’Toole said, smiling, “you’re one to talk.”

“Indeed,” Mason agreed, “but let us not use past mistakes to justify current ones. Peter,” Mason was quite serious now, “I fear for the future. This belligerence alarms me. Who can say what the United States will do in the next few years? You may never see your son again.”

“You worry too much,” O’Toole said. “And we both know that all Danny needs is a little worldly wisdom. Where better to get it than behind enemy lines?”

“And you’ll call me when you get to grandpa’s?” Tara insisted.

“Yes mom,” Dan answered. “I’ll have the pilot radio you too.”

“Oh my, aren’t you the confident world traveler,” Tara said. “Now I want you to be very careful over there. It’s not as safe as it is here on the island.”

“Yes mom,” Dan muttered.

Mason walked over. Tara once again checked that Danny’s bags had proper tags, then walked back to her husband to give the professor a private moment.

“Daniel,” Mason said, “you’ve read most of my books and listened to me pontificate your whole life. Now I want you to go over there and see it for yourself: life under the State.”

“Sure thing, Professor,” Dan said. “I’ll shoot an I.R.S. agent for you.”

“Good show,” Mason said. “Of course, you really can’t say things like that once you’re on the plane.”

“I *know*,” Dan said. Why did everyone think he was so stupid?

“Matt!” Dan suddenly yelled, looking over the crowd of bustling fliers.

“Ae-e-e-e, there ’e is!” Matt yelled and jogged up. As Tara had done before him, Mason walked away to give the two young men privacy.

“I thought you’d miss my flight,” Dan said.

“Well, I’ll be honest,” Matt said. “Last night, as I was orchestrating a daisy chain with these two girls from Spain I took home from the bar, I thought, ‘There’s no way in hell I’m gonna get up by 9 A.M.’ But, as it turns out, this morning I had to piss, and looking at those senioritas, I realized that the whole was definitely greater than the sum of the parts. So I told them I had to see my good buddy off to the States. I’ll tell you what, if I hadn’t gotten them out of my apartment quick-like, they could’ve broken a mirror or something.”

“Glad my quest for an education could assist you,” Dan said.

“So tell me Danny boy,” Matt said, “are you goin over there with a full cherry? I don’t mean to be crude, but we need to know what we’re dealing with here.”

“If you’re asking me—” Dan began, and hesitated.

“I’m saying, have you played hide the salami with a chick?”

“Strictly speaking, no.”

“Okay,” Matt said and thought. “Say—you’re not a fag, are you?”

“Hell no!” Dan protested.

“Whoa whoa whoa,” Matt said, holding up his hands, “easy there fella. There’s no shame in it. Seriously, if you like to smoke pole, just tell me now. I *will not* fault you for a taste in scrotum. But I don’t want to be sitting here, giving movie tickets to a blind man.”

“Screw you,” Dan said. “I’m not gay.”

“Okay, okay,” Matt agreed, “we’ve just gotta get you over that learning curve. First thing: Always remember that you’re going into a new place. Nobody there knows that you’ve been the strikeout king here in Minerva. So, leave all your psychological hang-ups on the island. Convince yourself that there are two Dan O’Tooles, the one on Minerva who can’t get laid, and the one in the States who bangs chicks like it’s his job.”

Dan nodded his head. He was listening far more intently to these pearls of wisdom than those offered by the professor.

“Second: If you ever feel intimidated by a girl, just remember: she is physically smaller and weaker than you, *and* she’s a lot more emotionally insecure. I guarantee you that ninety percent of the time when you think you’re bothering a girl, in reality, she’s worrying about how she looks or if she sounds stupid.

“Third: Do *not* let yourself fall into the trap of trying to outcompete guys for the prize girl. That is the complete, one hundred percent wrong approach. You need to let the prospective *girls* prove which ones are worthy enough to lick Dan O’Toole’s balls. Do you see the tremendous difference?”

* * *

“...so when you get out there, you have to be aware of the different groups, your skaters, your punks, your wiggers...”

“What’s a wigger?” Dan asked.

“A white nigger,” Matt informed him. “You know, white kids who wear baggy pants and try to rap.”

“Oh,” Dan said. “What’s the word for a black kid who acts white?”

“A nigger,” Matt said after a moment of thought.

The lesson was cut short as O’Toole approached the pair. Matt deferred to the father by walking over to Tara, who was looking particularly sultry. Matt assumed it had to do with the whole protective mother thing.

“All set, buddy?” O’Toole asked.

Dan nodded.

“I’m not going to bore you with a bunch of tips,” O’Toole said, “and anyway, I think the good Mr. King has already done enough.”

Dan laughed.

“But I’d please like you to remember this: No one in this world will believe that integrity works, unless someone gives them a living example. As long as you stay true to your own personal code, you will never regret a single day in your life.”

Dan nodded and picked up his suitcase. He shook his father’s hand and headed for the gate.

“He’s so young,” Tara said as her son walked out of view.

“That boy is going to do something big,” O’Toole said.

As he watched his son leave for boarding school, Peter O’Toole’s arms filled with goosebumps, while a soothing warmth spread throughout his insides.