

PART VI

Thirty-Nine

Matt sauntered back to the table, a wide smile on his face.

“I just took,” he announced, “the smoothest shit that has ever been moved by a bowel.”

“Glad to hear it,” Jim said.

“How many sheets of toilet paper?” Nook inquired.

“My friends,” Matt said, “in this case, wiping was a mere formality.”

* * *

“All I’m saying,” Jim said, “is that I’d be embarrassed.”

“So let me get this straight,” Matt said. “My people take over half the world and put yours in chains, and I’m supposed to feel stupid because you’ve got more rhythm.”

“Yeah, slavery’s something you should really be proud of,” Jim said.

“Oh give me a break,” Matt said. “Everybody was fucked up back then. The Africans would’ve enslaved the Europeans if they could have. It was just too bad that we invented civilization while you were running around the jungle with a spear while your women were picking berries with their titties flopping out.”

“Oh so now the white man invented civilization?” Jim snorted.

“Basically,” Matt said. “That’s why even during Black Heritage Month we learn about that clever George Washington Carver and his sixty-four uses of the peanut. Sweet, man. We’ve got Einstein with his Nobel Prize for relativity, and you’re putting up a peanut scientist. And even there,” Matt added, “he was so white his parents *named* him after a slaveowner.”

“Actually,” Dan interjected, “I think Einstein won it for his work on Brownian motion.”

“I know that,” Matt said, “and *you* know that, but if I said ‘Brownian motion’ Jimmy here would think it a slur.”

“Don’t listen to him, Dan,” Tara said. “Matt subscribes to the philosophy of might makes right. I mean really, if women and minorities are so talented, how come they don’t own everything? Right Matt?”

“Are you shitting me?” Matt said. “Danny, don’t let your mother’s fantasy distort your vision of the world. You try go walking around a nice white neighborhood, then go to Compton and hang with the niggers—”

Matt caught himself, but too late.

“Oooh,” Tara whispered, sipping on her drink.

“What’d you say?” Jim asked, standing up.

“I said the people in Compton lead a very niggardly lifestyle,” Matt said. “I guess they didn’t teach you that word in P.S. 187.”

“What do you think, Tar baby?” Jim said. “I’m thinking Rocky III.”

“Fuck you,” Matt said. “It slipped, okay? Sue me.”

“I’m not gonna sue you,” Jim said. “I just want to hear a little of the Italian Stallion.”

“This is gay,” Matt protested. “How old are you?”

“Old enough to remember the scene where he calls for Adrian,” Jim said. “Let’s hear it.”

“Yo Adrian, I did it,” Matt mumbled.

“Get up and say it like you mean it,” Jim said.

“You just held your own against Apollo Creed,” Tara reminded him.

“Yo Adrian, I did it,” Matt said, louder this time.

“Hmm, I don’t know,” Jim said, walking over to Matt. “Danny, you tell me if you think he hits it.”

“Okay,” Dan said.

“Yo Adrian, I did it!” Matt yelled.

“Not bad,” Dan commented.

“Now for my Hulk Hogan,” Jim said.

Jim grabbed Matt’s shirt with his left hand and Matt’s crotch with his right. He lifted Matt up over his head, and held him parallel to the floor. As he talked, Jim slowly lifted Matt up and down a few inches.

“What do you say?” Jim said.

“Somebody catch me,” Matt mumbled.

Jim threw Matt at a neighboring table. The three customers had been monitoring the developing situation, and backed away with their drinks as Matt landed on their table.

* * *

Matt and Dan sat at the bar. The official excuse was that they had gone to gamble a bit, but in reality Matt had just wanted to get away from the table to calm down.

“Do you know that’s the third time he’s pulled that shit?” Matt asked.

“Nah, that’s the first I’d seen of it,” Dan said. “How’s it work? The n-word sets off a Rocky scene?”

“It’s not always Rocky,” Matt said. “Last time the fucking bully held me against a wall by my neck and demanded to know where Princess Leia was.”

“Gentlemen,” the bartender said as he walked over, “the four ladies at that table want to buy your next round.”

Dan felt a rush of excitement. Matt looked over his shoulder at the girls.

“All pigs,” Matt declared. “Though you might want to consider the one on the right, what with the B.O.U.S.’s.”

“The what?” the bartender asked, obviously amused by Matt King.

“Breasts of unusual size,” Dan explained.

“Look,” Matt said, “if we decline the drinks, does that mean we don’t have to talk to them? I already had bacon this morning.”

“Oh come on now,” the bartender said, chuckling. “Not too many guys get drinks from strange women.”

“Not the adjective I would have chosen,” Matt said. “Ahh shit.”

Two of the girls headed toward Matt and Dan. Although he would never admit so, Dan thought one of them was quite cute.

“What’s two hunky guys like you doing in a casino like—” the cute girl started to ask.

Matt grabbed the plastic sword out of his glass and spun on his stool to face the girls.

“Thunder,” he said, pointing the sword to his left. “Thunder,” he repeated, pointing it to his right. “Thunder,” he said, now pointing the sword straight up. “Thunder-thighs...HOOOOs!”

As Matt raised his arms and yelled, he fell backwards off his stool and spilled onto the floor. The girls rushed to help him.

“Are you all right?” the cute one asked.

Dan felt sick to his stomach. Matt did nothing but mock girls, and for some reason they adored him.

* * *

“Glad to see you back, Mr. Balboa,” Nook said as Matt and Dan returned to the large table.

“Don’t flatter yourself,” Matt said. “Dan and I are just stalking that hottie over there. Sure, we’ll make like we’re friends with you clowns, but I just want you to know I sit here only for the view it affords of her ass.”

“So Matthew,” Tara said, “Jack tells me you’re not returning to active duty.”

“Fuck no,” Matt said. “There’s too many girls I have yet to bang for me to be hijacking battleships.”

“It wasn’t a battleship,” Quinn said.

“It was when I told the story to two Swedish girls last night,” Matt said. “Seriously, have you guys tried that out? We’re actually famous.”

“It won’t last,” Quinn said.

“Ooh, ooh,” Matt said, nudging Dan. “Good news, she smokes!”

Dan looked to see the swimsuit model taking a drag from a cigarette.

“Why is that good news?” Nook asked. “She won’t eat as much when you take her out?”

“No, dipshit,” Matt said. “If she’s a smoker, it means she’s willing to degrade her body for immediate pleasure. Everything I want in a woman.”

Tara whispered something to Jim. He started laughing.

“Something you want to share with the class?” Matt demanded.

Tara shook her head no.

“What, you rip on me and can’t even say it to my face?” Matt asked.

“All I said was,” Tara explained, “that I thought the reason you liked a girl who smokes is that she’s willing to suck on skinny white rods.”

* * *

“Now that we’re good and drunk,” Matt said, “I want you to tell me what Nook said to you at that restaurant. I’ve been trying to figure out for *decades* how the hell he does it. I’m like fucking Mr. McGee, going up to people after the fact. ‘Didn’t anybody hear what he said? For the love of God, didn’t anyone *hear it?*’”

“Why don’t you ask him?” Tara said.

“Huh, no shit,” Matt said, “I never thought of that before. Because he won’t tell me, that’s why. So how bout Aunt Tara entertains us all with a story about what Chris Nook said to her when he tried to break her up.”

“Okay Matthew,” Tara said, “it all started when Peter left the table to receive a phone call.”

Matt’s eyes widened. He couldn’t believe she was actually going to tell him.

“Well, as soon as Peter left,” Tara continued, “Chris came in and sat at the table. But he didn’t call himself Chris. Anyway, he says, ‘Miss McClare, I have something to tell you about the man you’re dating.’”

Matt leaned forward. He was *finally* going to learn the Cockblock Jock’s secret!

“And then he says, ‘Are you familiar with Matt King?’”

Matt sat back. *What the hell?* There were plenty of girls who hadn’t known Matt, and yet Nook had always been able to work his magic...

Of course! He says something different every time!

“So I said yes, I know Matt King,” Tara continued. “I actually still thought you were yummy at the time. I didn’t know what a meanie you really were.”

Tara stopped her tale to hug her knees to her chest and turn away from the table.

“Yeah yeah, that’s great Tara,” Matt said. “You can start pouting and give me a stinger. B.F.D. honey, it’s nothing but a biological reaction. If you throw pepper in my face I’ll start sneezing too. Finish the goddamn story.”

“Well,” Tara said, sliding her legs back down, “Chris says it’s good that I know Matt King, and then pulls out...a nude photo of you.”

Matt was flabbergasted. It was certainly possible for Nook to have photos of him...the two had made countless amateur videos in their younger days.

“So of course,” Tara said, blushing, “I was a little worked up by this point. Then Chris tells me to focus on the genitals.”

“Stop,” Matt said, “let me digest.”

Matt had often toyed with the idea that his relatively small penis was actually a turn-on to women. He conjectured that his intimidating façade made the girls relieved to discover that he didn’t actually have the horse cock that one might have inferred from his behavior. So what was Nook’s angle? Would he tell Tara that Matt was interested, and get her to drop O’Toole? It seemed implausible, but then again, maybe Matt was even sexier than he realized?

“You may proceed,” Matt said.

“Well,” Tara said, “naturally I analyzed the photo with great enthusiasm. When I had finished, Chris said, ‘I know this may come as a shock to you, Miss McClare, but I can’t stand by and do nothing.’”

“Yes??” Matt said when Tara paused.

“Miss McClare,” Tara said, “I have reason to believe that Peter O’Toole’s dick is even smaller than Matt King’s.”

The table was silent for almost three seconds.

“Ohhh nooo!” Nook yelled, laughing uncontrollably.

“That’s my girl,” Jim said.

Matt fumed. It wasn’t the insult that pissed him off, but the fact that she had actually led him to believe she’d tell the real story. *And that little bitch knows it, too.*

“Let’s go Dan,” Matt said, standing up. “No wonder the kid’s all fucked up with girls, with a psycho for you as a mom.”

As they walked away from the table, Matt said, “I wonder if she’d still have that shit-eating grin if I bent her over the bar.”

“Again,” Dan protested, “my mom.”

“I’m sorry Dan,” Matt said, “but she pulls a stunt like that? I’m already your father, might as well make it official. You want a brother or a sister? I can aim left or right.”

Dan said nothing as they walked.

“Hey, you know what?” Matt said, stopping. “You go on ahead. I’ll meet you at the blackjack tables.”

“What, do you have to take another shit?” Dan asked. “Don’t forget about me.”

“Sure thing, don’t worry about it,” Matt said, waving him away.

After Dan had turned the corner, Matt headed back to the table. Tara looked up as he approached.

“You know what, Tara?” Matt said. “You really suck as a human being. You get away with your shit because you’re hot and rich, but I just want you to know that you *suck* as a human being. Sure, I’m an asshole, but at least I have boundaries. You just say whatever the hell pops into your head. So I just want you to know that you *suck*. That’s why you don’t have any girlfriends, because they’re not blinded by your looks so they know how much of a bitch you are.”

“Come here, Matthew,” Tara said.

“Fuck no,” Matt said, and turned away.

“Matthew, come here,” Tara said.

“Screw you,” Matt said, and started walking away from the table.

Tara got up and ran to catch him.

“Oh tut tut Matthew,” she said, taking his left arm. “I need a drink but I don’t have an escort. I wouldn’t want some scary fellow to hit on me.”

Matt couldn’t resist. He allowed Tara to steer him to the bar.

“Bartender,” she said, “this gorgeous gentleman will have a Jack and coke, and I’ll need a Bloody Mary.”

“Coming right up,” the man said.

“Were you really upset at my story?” Tara asked.

“Hell yes,” Matt said. “I really want to know what he says to girls.”

“Well,” Tara said, “I’m not sure it would be ethical for me to divulge his trade secret.”

“Yeah yeah,” Matt said, picking up his new drink from the bar.

Tara took a single sip from her drink and then threw it in Matt’s face.

“What the fuck?!” Matt yelled.

“You listen to me you little *shit*,” Tara said. “*Nobody* talks to me like that. Your problem, Mr. King, is that you don’t even know what it is to care about someone—not even yourself. And just so you know, the only reason I even *let* you associate with my son is so he sees first-hand how *bankrupt* your lifestyle is.”

Tara turned and walked away.

“Can I get a fuckin towel here?” Matt asked.

As the bartender scrambled for a towel, Matt noticed three men at the bar staring. They had obviously been quite fascinated by the scene. Matt gestured at the dipshit bartender and shrugged his shoulders. The men smiled.

“Thanks,” Matt said when he was handed the towel. After wiping his face, he tried his best to clean off his shirt. *Couldn’t have been gin*, he thought.

Matt noticed that the three men were still stealing glances at him. He leaned in to talk confidentially with them.

“So last night was the first time me and the lady...I stuck it in her poop chute. And then I just talked soooo dirrrrrty.”

The men had wide eyes and open mouths by this point.

“And of course she’s loving it, begging me for more,” Matt said. “Now all of a sudden today she’s all, ‘You don’t love me anymore. You never used to stick it in my butt.’”

The men laughed.

“Ain’t that always how it is, the first time you ride the caboose with a woman?” Matt asked.

The men agreed wholeheartedly, even though none of them had ever engaged in anal sex.

“I’ll grant you,” Matt conceded, “she’s entitled to a little resentment; if someone stuck a chub up *my* ass, I’d be a bit peeved myself.”

The men endorsed Matt’s sympathetic analysis.

“But a drink in my face?” Matt asked.

“That’s bullshit,” one of the men finally spoke.

“And you say she loved it?” another asked, emboldened by his friend.

“Fuckin A she loved it,” Matt said. “And you, my friend, have just hit the nail on the head. What are you guys drinkin?”

“Nah nah,” they protested. “We’re buying.”

“Whoa, fellows,” Matt said. “The last drink someone bought me ended up on my shirt. *I’m* buying.”

After placing their order, one of the men dared, “So are you two an item?”

The man was simply curious; he knew a beautiful redhead like that wouldn’t give him the time of day.

“Well ain’t this guy bold,” Matt proclaimed, looking at the other two. “Here I am, buying him a drink, dripping in tomato juice, and he’s trying to fuck my date.”

The other men laughed hysterically while the first man apologized profusely.

These guys would blow me, Matt realized.

Forty

“So that’s where we stand,” Peckard said to the other Trust board members. “With their stepped up patrols, we run out of fuel reserves in fifteen days if we do nothing.”

Ribald stared at the table in front of him. He couldn’t bring himself to look at Peckard.

“And the thing with China...?” Kennedy hoped.

“The thing with China,” Peckard said, “fell through when the U.S. fleet gained twenty-five kilometers. My contacts thought the deal would work when we were locked in a stalemate, but they don’t want to back a loser.”

“So what are our options?” someone asked.

“Well,” Peckard said, “we could knock out another wave of satellites. Of course, this time it’s mostly commercial ones that the U.S. has requisitioned, so it won’t fly as well in the courts.”

“That won’t buy us much,” Brady said. “With so many aircraft and as close as they are, they can pretty well seal us off without satellites.”

“I was thinking,” Peckard said, “we *could* just ground our jets, and tell the White House what we’re doing. Feynman tells me that the Trust is technically only liable for the taxes that would have to be paid should an outside government conquer the island. We wouldn’t have to indemnify policyholders for the loss in market value.”

Peckard could tell from the men’s faces that this would not pass a vote.

“Gentlemen, relax,” Peckard said, “I’m just brainstorming here. We’ve *also* got the EMP wildcard...”

The men were suddenly alert. Months ago, Peckard had sought and gained their approval for research into a low-yield nuclear device. Its electromagnetic pulse (EMP) could disrupt unprotected electronics, and would be capable of temporarily crippling an entire carrier group.

“Is it ready?” Ribald asked.

“Yes, it passed the final tests while I was away,” Peckard lied. The tests had actually been completed two weeks earlier.

“I’ve also arranged for several small tankers to position themselves right here,” Peckard said, pointing to a wall map. “If we take out a carrier, we can bring in another two months’ of oil while the U.S. reestablishes its perimeter.”

“I never heard about the tankers,” Brady objected. “Were you going to go ahead with your plan without telling us?”

“I’m telling you right now,” Peckard said. “Whatever we do, we’ll need to get tankers in here. I just saved us the time of waiting for them to move into position.”

“And I suppose you’ve got the subs ready, too?” Brady asked.

“Of course,” Peckard said. “It doesn’t take much; they just need to move in and fire their torpedoes after the EMP blast. The crews haven’t gotten their orders yet; I don’t want to spill the beans.”

“And you don’t know if we’ll even vote with you,” Brady reminded him.

“Of course,” Peckard said with a smile. “I just want to give you gentlemen as many options as possible.”

“And you’re sure this is legal?” someone asked.

“It’s perfectly legal,” Feynman answered. “We have to allow surprise inspections of our labs, and our reinsurance premiums are astronomical because of the enriched uranium, but yes, it’s legal. If the EMP knocks out a fishing boat’s radio, we’re liable for that, of course. But our subs have every right to sink a blockading U.S. carrier off our coast.”

“And we’re sure about the ABM satellites?” Ribald asked.

“Absolutely,” Maynard answered. “Our lasers will knock out any ICBMs the U.S. might launch.”

“What about submarine launches?” Brady asked.

“Our intelligence indicates that there are at most three subs with nuclear warheads in our waters,” Peckard answered. “Our Defenders can take care of whatever they might fire.”

“And if they deploy their entire fleet?” Brady pressed. “I don’t like the idea of nuclear missiles being launched at us from point blank range.”

“I’ve already placed the orders for more minelayers and sub nets,” Peckard said. “We’ll have plenty of time to prepare if the U.S. sends more submarines.”

“I appreciate your concerns,” Peckard said after a few moments of silence. “But gentlemen, we’re not even ‘nuking’ them. All we’re doing is knocking out their electronics so we can sneak a few conventional torpedoes past their defenses. After it’s done, we immediately go on the air and tell the U.S. to pull back its remaining ships to 250 kilometers, or else we take out an additional carrier every twenty-four hours. Black will *obviously* do so, and in the meantime we’ll replenish our supplies. The world will see that we can’t be beaten, and we can negotiate a gradual withdrawal.”

That’s not going to happen at all, Brady thought.

Forty-One

“Hey, do you know if Jennifer Heyden is working tonight?” Matt asked the pretty waitress as she brought his drink.

“Sorry, don’t know her,” she replied.

Matt gulped from his beer. He had done nothing but drink and snort since the others had left the night before.

“So what’s up with this blockade?” the comic asked from the stage. “I mean, I can buy a lobster dinner, but I can’t afford a table to eat it off of.”

A few people chuckled. Matt could not *believe* the shit that passed for funny these days.

“And what’s the deal with Steven Peckard?” the comic asked. “Do you guys trust this cat? I keep waiting for him to start breeding mutant lobsters.”

“We should send you over to hurt their morale,” Matt yelled. A few people laughed.

“Uh oh, we’ve got a heckler,” the comic announced.

“Sure ain’t got *talent*,” Matt informed him.

“You don’t think I’m funny?” the comic asked, stalling. It was hard to see with the glare, but unfortunately the heckler appeared quite good-looking.

“I think you fucking *suck*,” Matt said.

“You kiss your mother with that mouth?” the comic asked.

“Yeah...and I sodomize yours with this *dick*,” Matt yelled, squeezing his crotch. The comic obviously had no idea who he was dealing with. The entire crowd now faced Matt.

“I suppose you think you can come up here and do a better job?” the comic asked.

Matt looked over the staring crowd. Even though he tried to convince himself that they would enjoy his commentary much more than the joker currently up there, he still felt petrified. *Fuck it.*

Just think Sinatra, Matt thought as he headed for the stage.

* * *

“So where’s your Dad been?” Jim asked as he and Dan stepped onto the new ship, the *Emily St. Pierre*.

“He hasn’t left the apartment since he got back from the States,” Dan answered. “He’s afraid he’ll get lynched.”

“Yeah,” Jim said. “Well, I guess he had to do it for you.”

“No he didn’t,” Dan said. “Linda—that’s the girl—dropped the charge on her own. And I could’ve gotten out of the country the same way Matt did. I don’t know *what* the hell he was thinking.”

“Oh,” Jim said. “So what are you up to now?”

“I don’t know,” Dan said. “I wanna get the hell away from home, that’s for sure.”

“I hear ya,” Jim said. “Heh, look at that.”

Jim pulled back a loose panel from the wall.

“I bet it would be real easy for a stowaway to hide in there,” he commented.

Jim slid the panel back, and he and Dan continued their tour.

* * *

The audience roared, including the scheduled comic. Some even had tears streaming down their cheeks. *I knew I could do this shit. Just give me a fuckin chance.*

“Mister,” Matt suddenly said to a man in the front row. “Could you *please* get your date to stop undressing me with her eyes? There’s a draft up here.”

As the crowd laughed, Matt’s mind raced ahead to what he would say *after* the next impressions. He knew that during the bit, he wouldn’t be able to think.

“So that was Madden announcing a golf tournament,” Matt reminded the crowd. He didn’t want to overestimate them. “Now here’s two golf announcers doing the color commentary at the Superbowl...”

Forty-Two

President Anthony Black hurled his coffee mug at the wall. Did they think he wouldn't have the balls to do it?

Black calmed himself and sat back at his desk. Especially after the briefing, Black was sure that there was simply no other option. Still, killing anywhere from 500,000 to two million people was not something done lightly. Black didn't care about the whining marchers, who would howl no matter *what* he did, but he still had posterity to consider.

The first point was obvious: The Minervans had put the nuclear card on the table. So he clearly had the *right* to retaliate in kind. Now it was just a matter of *prudence*. What would best advance the cause of mankind?

It seemed to Black that the conflict boiled down to a clash of two irreconcilable systems. The fact that things had come to this, less than two decades after the island's founding, proved that the so-called anarchists could not exist side-by-side with democratic republics.

So the question was, which system was better? Black was a man who always trusted experience rather than theories. And in practice, the United States and the countries like her certainly did much better than the places in the world without strong governments.

Black caught himself. He realized that he had been trying to play god. No, it wasn't his business to decide which system was better. Just like a good attorney always argues for his client, so too Black realized that he had to give the system of constitutional government the fairest possible hearing. If it could be beaten, even when its military had its hands untied, then so be it.

Maybe, decades down the road, the anarchists would be proven right. Until then, Black couldn't abandon his responsibility to defend the security of the American people. As his generals had rightly stressed, the U.S. could not ignore such a flagrant attack on its forces. To do so would give hope to enemies the world over, and inspire countless more attacks.

President Anthony Black took a deep breath. He realized with some amusement that he was now the only other man in human history to understand what Harry Truman had endured.

Forty-Three

“Hey Jack,” Dan said to Quinn.

“What the hell...” Quinn said.

“There was a loose wall panel,” Dan explained.

“Well,” Quinn said, “I’m sorry kid, but I’ve got to turn around. Your mom would kill me if I took you on this run.”

* * *

“A hit,” the operator announced. Yet another incoming missile had been successfully intercepted at sea.

“How long till our jets can fire?” Peckard asked. A huge mass of U.S. aircraft, including heavy bombers and supporting fighters, was headed for Minerva. Peckard had scrambled some of the Trust’s fighters to meet them.

“Two minutes,” another technician answered.

“What the hell?” the technician said. “Sir, come look at this.”

Peckard jogged over to the station. On the display, the group of fifty-two dots were suddenly multiplying.

“What’s going on?” Peckard demanded. “Are they dropping foil?”

“No sir,” an analyst answered. “Those signatures cross-check on infrared as well as radar. We’re getting a visual now...”

An enhanced satellite photo slowly filled an overhead screen.

“Oh no,” someone whispered.

The U.S. warplanes were surrounded by hundreds of flying drones.

“Transfer control to Command Post Two,” Peckard ordered. The alternate headquarters was located several kilometers offshore. “Everybody get down to the bunker.”

As his employees hurried into the elevator, Peckard opened the door to the stairwell. He wanted to watch the incoming bombers from the roof.

* * *

O'Toole and Tara could see the explosions on the horizon. Gradually, the growing black cloud turned into distinct aircraft. It seemed as if they were headed straight for the couple.

O'Toole wrapped his arms around Tara's waist from behind.

"I love you," he whispered into her ear.

* * *

"Mr. President," General Merton pleaded, "we lost over seventy pilots. We can't afford another run."

"Damn it Merton," Black exploded. "We can't sit back with the job half done! There's no telling what those crazy bastards will pull if we don't wipe them out while we still can!"

Merton took a deep breath.

"Mr. President," he said, "in my capacity as a soldier in the executive branch, I cannot start a war without a formal declaration from the Congress. I believe that launching a second nuclear strike at this time would be an act of war, and hence unconstitutional. In good conscience, I cannot obey your order."

Epilogue

“I guess the Chinese worked out a ceasefire,” Quinn said from behind. Dan continued to stare at the smoking island from the deck of the *Emily St. Pierre*.

“That’s good,” Dan finally said, then headed back inside the ship. Quinn followed him.

“Look, Danny,” he said, “I’d love to take you with me, but...”

“But what?” Dan said. “I’ve got no family to go back to.”

“Probably not,” Quinn said. “But it’s like this—before, you were running away from your family. But now...”

“Yeah?” Dan asked.

“Now, you’d be running away from yourself.”

Dan grunted and went back outside to the deck.

Jim came in from another room.

“I heard what you said,” Jim said. “That was some pretty deep stuff.”

“Thanks,” Quinn said and snorted. “Poor kid.”

“He’ll be all right,” Jim said. “You’ll see.”

A Word from the Author

I hope you enjoyed this rough cut of *Minerva*. For your convenience, the entire draft is available in PDF form at Strike the Root. Please let your friends and acquaintances know about it if they might be interested.

And now down to business: If any person or group PayPal's me an advance of \$50,000, then I will sign a contract promising to deliver the full-length sequel to *Minerva* within three years from the date of initial payment. Upon delivery of the final manuscript, I will receive an additional \$450,000. Included with the manuscript will be all rights to the sequel, as well as a promise by me to discuss the sequel with no one except those I may consult for technical/stylistic suggestions.

Bob Murphy

April 2004