

Chapter Three

September 12, 2030- 6:12 am EST

“Hey, Sejal. Just thought I’d drop you a video while I had some free time, and because I know you’re probably asleep right now. Things are going well here. We ... uhh ... listen, I know you don’t like to be lied to. The unit’s spirits are pretty down right now, especially after losing Kemenski. But we’re pushing on like we always do. I can’t tell you any specifics, but I’m sure you’ve heard about Pittsburgh. No lie, I think it’ll be ours by the end of the month. How are things in Austin, though? I heard President Burke had a big gala recently to celebrate the fall of Richmond. Did you get to go? I mean, I know it’s all propaganda for the war effort, but hey, free drinks, Ms. 21! And not to mention the whole networking to gain contacts as a reporter thing blah, blah. In all seriousness, I miss ya, Sis. Hopefully I’ll get some time off soon after we’re done up here. Until then, Happy Anant. I love you. Bye.”

Samir sent the message and stored the tablet in his knapsack inside his unit’s tent. It was early morning, and he had just returned from a midnight mission near the front lines with his platoon. Samir was now a lieutenant leading a Republican Navy *Mako* Special Operations unit. He was a veteran, first receiving his rank through the expedited Chapel Hill ROTC program, just after the failed Dem invasion of North Carolina in 2025. After training for Special Ops, he took part in the long campaign for Virginia, and was even assigned to intermittent amphibious missions against the remaining Dem insurgency in Southern Florida.

Beyond a few clear victories for both sides, including the recent Rep capture of Richmond, the somewhat arbitrary lines drawn between the two factions had barely moved in the five years since *Wilmington*. The Republicans, organized under the newly formed, shaky Republican States of America government based in Austin, largely controlled the South from Virginia down to Texas, as well as most of the Great Plains and much of the Rockies. States in the far west had proven harder to control, including Nevada since the Republicans consolidated it shortly after *Wilmington*. The sole bastion of Democratic power in the middle of the country continued to be Western Colorado, an island fortress state high in the mountains, yet even the Dem leadership was wary to say what Coloradans thought of the war after years of minimal contact.

The states on the West Coast, however, had been Democratic strongholds since the beginning, blocking any hope for Rep access to the Pacific. These, along with the northern states from the Midwest up to New England, comprised what was now the geographically-separated North American Democratic Commonwealth, the other shaky nation state thrown together when most of the mass migrations of the early war had finished.

As for Alaska and Hawaii, they were now their own independent, democratic countries. Both had decided that their distance from the Continental US entitled them to staying out of the fight, even though the Democratic Alaskan Republic favored the RSA and the Sovereign State of Hawaii favored the NADC. Their decisions not to join the Second Civil War may have ultimately been right, especially since the conflict had so far claimed over a million civilian and military lives, with many of the deaths coming early on as the borders were being decided.

With such a horrific death toll, one could easily suspect the use of nuclear weapons. Yet neither side had thus far resorted to using them, both due to a fear of retaliation as well as advanced *laser defense grids* that could shoot most missiles, and for that matter, high-flying enemy warplanes, out of the sky. It's for this reason that the Second Civil War was largely fought on the ground for much of its duration.

Samir's unit and the bulk of eastern Republican forces were now in Southwest Pennsylvania as part of the Three Rivers Campaign, an operation to take Pittsburgh and cut the Eastern NADC in half. Always organized, he checked his things in the tent to make sure everything was in order. Rifle? Check. He was never more than five feet from it. Military issued, impossibly itchy underwear and socks? Check. Ahh, his hard copy of John Locke's *Second Treatise*. His college experience was short, he thought, but the Reps made sure their future officers read this again ... and again. Samir fumbled around a bit more before coming to one last thing. He paused as he always did. Picture of Mom and Dad. Check. He knew everyone typically kept all their pictures on tablets, but five years had taught him never to trust the cloud. Data networks were typically the first thing attacked during an invasion, and he wasn't going to lose them again to the war.

"Lieutenant?" came a voice from outside his tent.

"Yes, uhh ... yes, one second." Samir replied. He finished packing everything and opened the tent. The sunrise was blocked by misty clouds hanging over the tree-topped Allegheny Mountains. Their camp had been placed in the hills south of the city, with the formal Rep border at the old West Virginia state line several miles behind them. "What is it, Ensign Mills?"

"Sorry to bother you, sir," said Mills, a blonde woman of German and English descent in her mid-twenties. Amy Mills was originally from Cincinnati before the war. After Wilmington, she and her Republican family barely made it to Kentucky before Ohio was consolidated as Dem territory. One of the many women who had volunteered for Special Ops training on both sides since then, she often made it a point not to let her natural beauty and sapphire blue eyes outshine her toughness in front of the men, often beating them in hand-to-hand combat training. She, like Samir, was wearing a green t-shirt and open brown jacket along with green fatigue pants and brown combat boots. Her long hair was tied up in a clean pony tail, a sign that she had just showered, unlike Samir whose greasy, short hair betrayed his lack of hygiene that day. "Captain Chalmers wants to see you in his quarters. He says it's urgent."

"Never get a minute, do we?" Samir asked with a smile.

"No, sir," Mills replied without expression. "Makos never rest."

Samir stopped smiling awkwardly. "Walk with me, Mills."

"Aye, sir."

The two started to tread out into the busy camp. "Are you OK, Amy? You seemed distant on the mission."

"I'm fine, sir."

“Come on, now. You only call me sir off-duty when you’re beating me at poker.”

“Anyone can beat you at poker, sir.”

“Amy, seriously.”

“Yeah, OK. I know I’ve been off lately. It’s just that it’s been a while since I’ve been back in this part of the country. That plus losing Kemenski ... it’s just been a tough couple of weeks. I mean, last night was the first time I had seen the Ohio River since ... well since just after Wilmington. Do you ever make it back there, Samir?”

The two paused to let some automated green Humvees pass by. “Oh, I go back there all the time,” Samir replied when the sound died down. “Just not too often in a literal sense. War has kept all of us busy. You know it’s my responsibility to make sure everyone’s fit for duty, Amy. You’ll see Cincinnati again. I promise. The Dems can’t keep fighting forever.”

They were close to the captain’s quarters, now. “Trust me, no one actually *wants* to see Cincinnati,” Mills replied with a smirk, “but everyone does want to go home again ... sir.” She saluted Samir and walked away.

He smiled before noticing a young private with his eyes lowered in Mills’ direction. “Eyes up, soldier!” he yelled in rough voice. The kid immediately jumped to attention.

The Republican flag waved in the wind over the captain’s green tent. Samir never liked its design, but it was worn by every soldier on the left shoulder of their jackets, just as the Dems wore the NADC design on theirs. While the Dem flag consisted of two vertical navy blue bars separated by a centered white bar, the RSA flag consisted of a large white square with four smaller squares at its corners, all on a field of scarlet. In addition to the RSA flag, Makos’ jackets also sported the unit’s special patch on the right shoulder sleeve. It showed a grey mako shark jumping out of the water, gnashing its teeth over a rising sun. Inscribed over the image was the Makos’ motto, *Honor Rising*. This was different from the national motto of the RSA, *God and Liberty*.

God and Liberty. Those words were drilled into every RSA officer’s head during training. Samir never liked mottos, either. If everything that was right in the world could be summarized in two words or some absurd acronym, he thought, maybe they wouldn’t be fighting this war in the first place.

He entered the dark tent, surprised to find not just the captain of his warfare group, but a four star Army general as well. Samir immediately snapped to attention and saluted. “At ease, son,” Captain Chalmers said in a Texan accent with a cigar in his hand. He always seemed to have a cigar in his hand. Jason Chalmers was a brown haired, forty-something cowboy whose crow’s feet and various scars signaled that he had been a Special Operator since long before the war broke out. Samir and the other officers in the warfare group often guessed that he used to be a SEAL, although no one ever found out for sure. He wore an unassuming green t-shirt and had his boots up on a wooden desk in front of him.

“Aye, sir. I ... wasn’t expecting you to have a guest.”

“So this is the famous Lieutenant Nashwari,” the older, white-haired general said with a raspy voice, sticking out his hand as he stepped into the light. “Carter Dixon. Nice to finally meet you.” Samir could now see his familiar facial features and the many colorful badges that covered his black, formal uniform. Still, the red RSA flag was sewn on his left shoulder. Even the highest of commanders needed to remember who they were fighting for, apparently.

“The ... *the* Carter Dixon?” the bewildered Samir replied, shaking the general’s hand furiously. “Chairman of the RSA Joint Chiefs of Staff? Sir, I’ve read all your articles and your two books.”

“Keep your pants on, Nashwari,” Captain Chalmers advised jokingly.

“It’s fine, Chalmers,” said Dixon, chuckling at first and then clearing his throat in a serious manner. “But I’m afraid my time is limited, and we do have to get down to business, son. Have a seat. Chalmers?”

“Right,” replied Chalmers as he moved his boots and pulled out a black, cylindrical holographic map projector to put on his desk. Samir sat down in one of two chairs nearby, a little embarrassed at his reaction to the general. Chalmers turned on the three-dimensional map.

“Nashwari, I don’t need to tell you that everything from this point on is top secret. What you see here is the Potomac River and the greater Washington, DC area. I’m sad to say that you and your team’s sacrifices here in Pennsylvania have been part of a costly but necessary decoy operation serving the larger invasion focused on Maryland and the Dem capital. Everything that happened in Virginia was also all carried out with this goal in mind.”

“It’s about time we take it back, sir,” Samir commented.

“*Hooyah*,” Chalmers responded with the official Mako cheer. “But you’re in here because we don’t want you to take part in the main invasion. General?”

The general walked over to work the map with his hand waving in the air. The colorful lights responded, revealing images of Samir’s past. “Samir, you won’t be surprised to know that I have come all this way from Austin to assess you in person. I was actually in the command center last night watching you and your team’s every move. To speak plainly, son, I liked what I saw, and this was before your generous flattery. More seriously, though, I have been studying you for quite some time. I know of your key operations during the siege of Norfolk as well as your missions in Miami against the insurgency.” The general paused and then pulled up a picture of the old Cape Fear Memorial Bridge before continuing. “I even know about Wilmington. Shows you the character of the Dems, taking out a whole bridge of civilians. It takes a lot of guts for a man to continue on after a tragedy like that.” Samir didn’t know what to say, staring at the ground as a twinge of memory ran through him. The general soon finished. “In short, I think you’re one of the best we’ve got, son. Nice when flattery is a two-way street, isn’t it?”

“Thank you, sir,” Samir replied tiredly. “But my team deserves all the credit.”

“And modest, too,” General Dixon said while looking at Chalmers. “The sign of a good leader.” The general came back around the desk and sat in the chair next to Samir, which seemed closer than before. The energy with which he sat kicked up some of the dust on the rubber mat that

constituted a floor in the captain's quarters. "Son, if I asked you what the most important document in American history was, what would you say?"

Samir thought for a moment about the question. What was a strategy meeting now seemed more like an interview to get into a prestigious school. "Well ... there are many sir," he began, "but given the current situation, I would have to say it was the 2023 Shifting Act."

"Ha!" the general laughed loudly after an awkward pause. "A scholar to the last. I like that. But no, son. Go back way further than that to Philadelphia in 1787, specifically the Constitutional Convention. What those fifty-some-odd men created during that hot and muggy summer became one of the greatest collaborative, intellectual works the world had ever seen. Do you remember the first lines of the Preamble from grade school, Samir? They made us memorize the whole damn thing at WestPoint."

Samir paused for a moment, not entirely sure where this meeting was going, and then recited from memory. "Uhh ... We the People of the United States, in order to form a more perfect union, establish justice, insure domestic tranquility ... provide for the common defense ..."

"Right!" the general affirmed loudly, stopping him. "Good, good. Beautiful way to open a beautiful document. Samir, I don't know if you realize, but those are the things our side is currently fighting for. Freedom, domestic tranquility, and the ability to defend those things, God willing!"

"Hooyah," Chalmers said in a somewhat distant manner while trying to light his cigar.

"Let me ask you one more question," General Dixon continued. "Why do you think we've continued to fight them, the Dems, all these years? Why do you think we don't just stop at the Sierra Nevada or the Potomac and seek a truce? Heck, we control most of the land anyway."

"I've ... often thought about that, sir. I suspect, after five years, that it's because many people just want to go home, now, and home for many is across the Sierra Nevada or the Potomac."

"Ha! I like your jokes. This kid's a riot, Chalmers." Chalmers chuckled almost nervously in response. "Seriously though, son," Dixon continued, lowering his voice as he got even closer to Samir, "in the end, we seek to restore America back to what it once was. We don't want to live in the RSA forever. That was never the goal. None of my colleagues in Austin want that. Instead, we believe that America had lost its way well before the war, that it had forgotten those core Constitutional principles you just recited. If we can bring the Union together again, if we can help the people in all the NADC states see where their power hungry Dem leaders have led them, then we can begin to build a government that is simultaneously new and old. But to do that, then God willing, we've got to cross the Potomac."

"Hooyah, sir," Samir replied under his breath, still not sure what the general's intent was.

"So, Samir!" Dixon shouted, standing up and going back to the map. "We want you to take your team into the heart of Washington, to the National Archives, and retrieve the very document we've been talking about here today. The original, signed Constitution of the United States, complete with the Bill of Rights. Not only will that ensure its safety during the invasion, but

having it will also ensure our legitimacy as we liberate all the territories currently held by the NADC.” Samir couldn’t believe what he was hearing.

“We have good intel telling us it’s still in the National Archives,” Captain Chalmers said from his chair, waving at the map with his cigar hand to bring up another image of DC. “In eighteen hours, we’ll have you and your platoon cross into the District via underwater navigation just as the invasion is beginning. We know you’re down a man recently, but a smaller team will be better for this mission. We’ll get you guys someone new soon after. Everything you do up until the document is in your hands will be covert. Once you have it, a helicopter evac will be waiting, hopefully, just outside the Archives as the bulk of the Dem forces engage us near the river. I’d be prepared to run a little bit, just in case.”

“Sir, isn’t it under bullet proof glass? And what about the ...”

“That will all be in the more detailed mission brief,” Chalmers interjected. “You’ll need to have part of your team infiltrate the security rooms underneath the document display cases. We’d prefer it if you could keep the doc in a special transport case we’ll provide, but preservation concerns shouldn’t compromise the entire mission.”

“Understood, but don’t we also want the Dec ...”

“One last thing, Samir,” General Dixon said abruptly while peeking outside the tent. “I’m happy to tell you we’re promoting you to Lieutenant Commander. And if you and your platoon are successful here, we may even give you elite priority status for all future high-stakes missions. How’s that sound?”

Trying to process everything, all Samir could say was, “I’m honored, sir.”

“Great!” the general bellowed, almost startling him. “I’ve got to get back to Austin to inform the president before the invasion. Chalmers, you’ll take care of him from here? Samir, I’ll be waiting to hear the good news.” General Dixon slapped him on the shoulder from behind and quickly left the tent to enter a Humvee transport.

Samir stood up. “Sir, do you mind if I ask you some more questions about the mission?”

“My time is limited, Nashwari,” Chalmers replied while making another attempt to light his cigar. “The rest of the warfare group and I are staying here in Pennsylvania. Even with a decoy invasion, Special Operations are needed. What’s up?”

“I’m just curious, sir. Why only the Constitution? Isn’t the Declaration of Independence equally important?”

“Evidently the general and the suits in Austin don’t think so. This one comes straight from President Burke’s desk, Nashwari. You should be proud. I’m certainly proud of you.”

Samir was surprised at the normally cold captain’s sentiments. “Thank you, sir. I’ve only been following your orders.”

“Besides,” Chalmers continued quickly as the strokes of his lighter became more and more frequent, “it’s one less old roll of parchment to take care of. Now, I want you and ... *dang it!* I haven’t been able to light my cigar once in this mountain air. Should have asked the general to move us out of the clouds already. Anyway, your team should get as much rest as you can before tonight. You’ll head down to Morgantown, and then take a C-130 to Richmond this afternoon. From there, you’ll be waiting for midnight.”

“Looking forward to it, sir.” The two saluted each other.

“Hooyah, Commander Nashwari!”

“Hooyah, Cap.” Samir smiled and started to leave.

“Oh and Nashwari!” the captain yelled, stopping Samir at the tent’s entrance. He held up some new cigars. “We’ll light a couple when you get back.”

Samir nodded and left the tent. He never smoked. His dad used to smoke cigarettes constantly. *These things will be the death of me*, he would always say.

Samir stirred from a light sleep against a hangar wall at the Richmond International Airport. His neck ached. He had been trying to rest since briefing his platoon on the flight from West Virginia that afternoon, but it was hard to sleep with constant vehicle and troop movement at the recently captured airport. The sun had been down for a few hours, and it was almost time to start the mission. He looked up. It was an overcast night, and the lights from the airport gave the fall sky an eerie shade of orange. Samir recognized the shade from many evening football games played throughout his childhood in the South. It would rain soon. Grabbing his knapsack, he got up to find his platoon.

A Republican Navy Mako platoon, with the exception of its size, followed very much the structure used by the Old United States’ Navy SEALs. Samir was the Commanding Officer of the platoon, and together with Ensign Mills, his Second in Command, normally directed four enlisted *Special Operators*. All of his Makos were in their early to mid-twenties.

He walked down the side of a large metal hangar to find his three remaining Special Operators resting in a circle around their equipment. They were using the massive wing of the stationary C-130 they flew in on as cover for any potential rainfall. Noticing him, one of them gave a greeting. “Hooyah, sir. Is it that time?”

“Not yet, Dang,” replied Samir as he walked up to her. “Y’all keep resting for now. How are you doing?”

Special Operator Brittany Dang was a visibly tough girl of Vietnamese descent. Her medium-length black hair was almost always tied up in a tight pony tail, and a small scar on her left cheek contrasted with her otherwise goofy and outgoing personality. Yet Samir always knew she was smart, a truth her calculating hazel-colored eyes often betrayed. Like Samir and the rest of the team in preparation for the mission, she had on thin black pants and versatile boots that a wet suit

and flippers could easily fit over. Unlike the rest of the team, however, she had on a vintage *Punk's Not Dead* t-shirt underneath her military issued black jacket. "Oh, alright," she said. "Just trying to adjust this new ... *Magni-Vest*, I think Jensen called it. And trying not to punch Moretti in his sleep."

"No," Samir clarified while chuckling. He looked around and then knelt down, continuing in a whisper. "I meant you, personally. I contacted his family. Have you?"

Dang visibly cringed at the question. "Why sir," she began saying with a louder voice, "are you referring to Special Operator Kemenski? The thought hasn't crossed my mind to write his family. But if you think it would console them during this sad time, I would gladly ..."

"Dang," Samir stopped her, "you know that I have to know everything about my unit, and I knew about you two." Dang sat up slowly off the ground and reached for her datapad without saying a word. Samir looked at the ground without standing up. After a few seconds, he thought he'd try again. "Look, I'm not asking you to talk about your feelings, especially before a mission. I just thought it would help them with ..."

"No, sir, I ... I think it's a good idea, too," she responded carefully. "You know, in training they teach you to never let your emotions get in the way of the mission. But it's hard sometimes to take yourself out of that mindset when something like this happens. Neil was ... an awesome, awesome guy. And you know, if he was here, he'd tell me straight up not to dwell on it. He would then do his stupid impression of President Burke to cheer me up ..." She laughed. Samir smiled in silence. "... right before he'd give me one of his bear hugs." Her smile disappeared. "I'll write his family as soon as I can, sir."

Samir nodded and put his hand on her shoulder. "Take your time, Dang."

She smiled again, never shedding a tear. Immediately, she jumped to lighter memories. "He was crazy, though. You remember that time he tried to drink a gallon of milk and do a hundred push-ups?"

The two of them exploded in laughter. "He spewed at 78!" Samir cried.

"Higher than I was betting," Dang replied in between chuckles. "That's for sure."

"Would you two kindly shut up?" asked a muffled, deep voice from the other end of the circle.

"Aww ... did we wake the baby?" Dang jeered.

"Yeah, and the baby's mad," replied Dominick Moretti, a bulky Italian American from San Diego, getting up from under his blanket. His light-brown hair was buzzed all over to the shortest of lengths, giving his entire head the appearance of a furry thumb, although he didn't like to admit it. That night, his dark, grey eyes were framed by even darker rings, indicating his lack of sleep, and in place of a jacket, he had on a very tight, white sleeveless shirt he often liked to wear on missions. Over the collar of his shirt swung his dog tags, used for identification, which he treated as pieces of proud jewelry.

"Moretti, when was the last time you weren't mad?" Dang jeered again.

“About the last time I thought you were a girl, Dang.”

“Really, Moretti?” Samir asked in an offended manner.

“Sorry, sir,” Moretti apologized, putting his hands up. “What I meant to say was about the last time I thought you were a girl, *fellow Special Operator* Dang!” Moretti bowed to Dang mockingly.

“That’s it!” she yelled as she jumped up and tackled Moretti out of the equipment circle, eventually putting him in a wrestling hold.

“Hey, hey!” Samir yelled in between laughs. “That’s enough! Tap out already, Moretti! I need all your bones unbroken for the mission.”

“Haven’t I proven you wrong about that ... before, sir?” Moretti choked out, quickly turning blue in the midst of a neck hold from Dang.

“Basic training wrestling champ, baby!” Dang shouted triumphantly. “That’s it. Sleep tight.” Moretti passed out, and Dang left him in an embarrassing position on the pavement. “Sad to say that won’t shut him up very long.”

“Me too,” Samir replied. “Make sure he doesn’t have brain damage when he wakes up, though.”

“Aye, sir,” Dang said reluctantly, kneeling next to Moretti, who was now snoring loudly.

“Are they fighting, again?” a guy’s voice asked Samir back in the equipment circle.

“What else is new?” Samir asked in response.

“They must like each other,” asserted Dameon Jensen, who had just woken up.

“Aww, good morning, honey,” said Dang audibly, mocking Moretti as he stirred.

“*Arrgh ...*” Moretti grunted while staring up at her. “Mommy?”

“How you feeling, DJ?” Samir asked.

“Feel like I’ve been sleeping on a runway for three hours, sir,” Jensen replied, cracking his back. “Other than that, just peachy.” Jensen was an African American from New York who was of medium height and lanky for a Mako. But Samir knew he was by far the most intelligent person in the platoon, and due to advanced schooling before and during the war, he was the de facto tech specialist of the group. Jensen had short brown hair and had been attempting to grow a mustache over the past few months. Despite what he believed, his attempts had so far been unsuccessful. Yet his golden eyes made up for any patchy hairs growing on his upper lip, that is, when they weren’t concealed by the thick, black horn-rimmed glasses he preferred over contacts.

“Do y’all have everything together?” Samir asked. “Everything running alright?”

“Ha,” Jensen chuckled. “Aye, sir.”

“What’s up?” Samir asked curiously.

“Nothing. I just keep forgetting *y'all* are from the South.”

“Yeah, and I keep forgetting how charming your Brooklyn accent is, too,” Samir shot back sarcastically.

“You know I’m from Suffolk, sir. Two different worlds.”

“Not to people from the Carolinas. What is this? Were you drawing something?”

“Just a sketch of that F-19 over there for my nephew back home. Can’t believe he’s already 6.”

“First of all, I didn’t know you were an artist,” Samir said, sitting down next to him, “and secondly, you have *stragglers*, Jensen?”

“Yeah,” he replied while sitting up uncomfortably, “but they’re not stragglers in the conventional sense. I ... straight up differed in views from most of my family.”

“That’s rough,” Samir commented while wrapping his arms around his knees. “Why have you never told me this? I knew your family was from New York, but I always assumed they came with you like Mills’s or Moretti’s.” Jensen had been with the platoon for years now.

“I’ve just ... never really talked about it before,” Jensen answered slowly. “Anyway, before the war, our differences would only show up after grace was said at Christmas dinner. Now, we’re *officially* supposed to hate each other. It doesn't matter, though. Soon we’ll all be having Christmas together, again.”

“And back to only *privately* hating each other then, I’m assuming?”

“*Mmm hmm*,” Jensen chuckled at that. “As it should be with any American family.” He looked at the orange sky for a moment. “You write Kemenski’s family yet?”

“Yeah, I did. Outside of Pittsburgh.”

“Damn good soldier,” Jensen said solemnly. Samir had learned that each soldier responded a different way to the death of someone close. Some preferred unabashed, external showings of grief. Others simply preferred to keep their emotions to themselves. Jensen was in the latter group. After a short while, he changed subjects. “But yeah, everyone’s *Visor Readers* are OK, last I checked. I’ll also run standard inspection on everyone’s Magni-Vests before we’re *Oscar Mike*.” Jensen pointed to the black military helmets with glass screens hanging down from them in the equipment circle, and then to the unassuming black vests nearby.

Visor Readers, or *visors* for short, were perhaps the most important technological advancement of the war, and both sides used them from the lowliest infantry private to the highest-ranking fighter pilot. They were made of non-shattering glass, and used data detection software developed before the war to give the wearer information they otherwise wouldn’t have. A visor could tell a marksman how far away a target was, could switch to night vision or all-out infrared to detect nearby enemies or could simply provide a map and other needed data concerning a surrounding area.

Magni-Vests were a high-tech version of the bulletproof vests used by Special Forces before the war. Along with visors, they represented some of the most advanced technology the RSA had, and could stop almost any small round fired from a hand gun or rifle using battery-powered electromagnets, at least when those rounds were fired at the areas covered by the vests. The Makos' model covered almost their entire torso and shoulders, leaving their heads and limbs free to move. Over the vests, they would then wear light, waterproof packs on their backs and harnesses around their waists and shoulders, in case any repelling would be needed over the course of a mission. The harnesses also provided convenient places to hang extra packs for ammo or flippers once they were done swimming. Indeed, while their gear was light enough to swim with, Makos had to be in excellent shape to carry all of this weight to a mission's end.

"Oh," Jensen added, "and we're running low on fresh data chips for the visor software, and we could definitely use some spare lithium batteries for these new vests. I'm sure we'll have a few shot at, blown apart or generally scorched soon."

"I'll make the call," Samir confirmed. He then noticed Dang walking back to the circle while cracking her neck. "Dang, did you ever hear from your family about that tornado?"

"Yeah I did!" Dang answered excitedly. "I forgot to tell you. The house turned out to be fine, but a lot of people in the neighborhood weren't as lucky. This has been a record year for twisters, and that's saying something for Oklahoma. It seems like the weather gets crazier every year the war drags on. Have you noticed?"

"Are you kidding?" Moretti asked rhetorically while hobbling back to the circle. "California has been in the worst drought it's ever seen for the past decade. Not that I care if the Dems on the coast die of thirst."

"Carolinas are the complete opposite," Samir offered. "More water than the reservoirs can handle."

"You know what I think?" Moretti grunted, leaning down to grab his jacket. "I think God must be angry with all of us for messing up His country. In God We Trusted, right? Probably wants our trust back. Still probly mostly the Dems' fault, though. Why if it isn't Ensign Mills! Here to join our little get together?"

"Stuff it, Moretti," Mills said without a passing glance as she approached the group. "Sir, just received the call. Command says it's about that time." Mills had her long, sand-colored hair hanging down, how she often liked to have it before a long mission, and her black jacket was unzipped to reveal a tight green tanktop underneath.

"Already?" Samir asked, confused.

"Afraid so. Apparently the Dems caught wind of us mobilizing. We need to move now to beat our own forces to DC."

"Wow," Moretti interjected, "something tells me this op won't be as covert as they told us."

Samir took a moment to stare at a column of tanks leaving the airport in the distance. The *pit pat* of rain drops around the wing of the C-130 slowly started as the rest of the platoon got their things together. Before every mission, he tried to remember exactly what led to him being in that particular spot, on that particular day, doing that particular thing. The longer the war lasted, the more events he had to remember, some good, many bad. Returning his thoughts to the conversation, he stood up abruptly.

“Has that ever stopped us before?” he asked, flashing a confident grin.

“Hell no,” Moretti said, putting on his vest and harness and grabbing his rifle.

“Alright, Makos!” Samir yelled to everyone. “The president himself wants us to retrieve the United States’ founding document and bring it back to him unharmed. I don’t need to tell you that we will be some of the first Republicans to set foot in DC since Wilmington.” He paused as the platoon silently stirred at the thought. “I can tell you, though, that we definitely won’t be the last.”

“Hooyah!” the platoon cried in unison.

“Let’s move!”

“We just crossed the Beltway, sir!” the Black Hawk-X helicopter pilot yelled into his helmet’s microphone over the loud chopping of the rotor blades. “ETA is five minutes!”

“Copy that!” Samir replied, sitting with his crew behind the cockpit. They all now had black wetsuits pulled over their fatigues, vests and harnesses. The only things left on the outside of the wetsuits were their waterproof packs, assault rifles and rebreathers, much smaller than the models used by Navy SEALs before the war and specially modified to be strapped to their chests. While their helmets would be stored in their packs for the swimming portion of the mission, the goggles they would be using also had visor software installed in them.

Samir looked through the light rain outside to see if he could recognize anything. He had come to DC on a field trip in middle school. That seemed like eons ago, now. The Dems had been pushed back across the Potomac in the past month as Rep forces took total control of Virginia, culminating in an emotional capture of Arlington and the Pentagon. Both sides now stared at each other across the heavily defended bridges leading into the District, waiting for the other force to make the next move. A big reason Republican commanders were initiating this invasion was a fear that the Dems would try to blow these vital links to their capital. As the copter flew up I-395 towards the river, several unfinished shopping and hotel developments started before the war passed below like ghosts in the night. While there had been enough of a buffer between Rep forces and DC for the past five years, Virginia’s economy suffered for it as some of the most intense fighting had taken place in the state.

Samir could see the lights of the city approaching, and more prominently the geometric outline of the Pentagon. The building had operated as the Dem military’s nerve center throughout the war, just as it had for the Old United States. He had heard that much of its internal data networks

and infrastructure were damaged or utterly destroyed by the Dems as they evacuated over the river. Beyond taking this vital resource from the Dems, the capture of Arlington was also a symbolic victory for the Republicans. The copter flew over the white stone graves of Arlington National Cemetery and the Iwo Jima Memorial. What was strange was that no matter how much the rest of Virginia had been ravaged during the war, both sides made it a point to step lightly near these hallowed grounds. While the Blue and White-barred NADC flag now flew over the White House and the Capitol Building, the old American flag still remained in the bronze hands of the Arlington Marines.

Both banks of the Potomac were heavily lit for miles, actually outshining the otherwise bright lights illuminating the National Mall. This outlined the natural de-militarized zone the river had become. Yet for Samir's mission to be successful, darkness would first be needed. Mills held her hand up to her ear. "Sir, Bravo Team has control of the power plant!" she yelled over the radio in reference to a second Mako platoon that was helping them that night. "They're waiting for your order!"

"Copy that!" Samir replied. "Remember, everyone! Fifteen seconds!" The helicopter was almost to the edge of the river. He took one last look at the Washington skyline, pulled his goggles over his face, and set the watch on the outside of his wetsuit. He then yelled into his headset's mic. "Bravo Team! Lights out!"

The city disappeared into pitch blackness just as the copter reached the waters near Theodore Roosevelt Island, marking a halfway point on the river. "Go, Go!" Samir ordered his team as the platoon started to jump into the water thirty feet below. He was the last to jump out. What was one of his biggest fears in training now seemed like nothing to him. Jump, weightlessness, splash. The Makos had gotten rid of his fear of the water, even when he had so much gear weighing him down. He rose to the surface to quickly gain his bearings with the visor component of his goggles. Noting their position, he then looked at his watch. Three seconds. He gave the hand gesture for anyone still on the surface to dive immediately as the helicopter sped back to the Virginia side of the river. The sounds of the rotor blades and sirens coming from DC were soon drowned out by the eerie silence of the water.

True to Samir's watch, the lights around the river and in the city turned back on just after his team submerged, confirming the Reps' intel that DC would switch to an alternate power source fifteen seconds after a blackout. The blackout itself was the official sign for all Rep forces to start the attack.

Samir soon found his team twenty feet below the surface. Using hand gestures and relying on data signatures seen in their goggles, he started to lead them on the nearly mile-long underwater swim across the Potomac. His mind flashed back to something Mills told him before the mission. *Nothing compares to Miami. And this time, no sharks!* The familiar sounds of explosions above traveled through the water in random pulses. The war was starting again, and this time it was for Washington.

Samir soon gave the sign that they were about to reach the eastern bank. With the explosions and gunfire from the bridges masking any sound they made, the platoon bolted onto the DC shore.

They then placed their backs against a stone wall running along the river. He cautiously peeked over to see an empty city street north of the Mall. “No sign of anyone,” he told Mills next to him in-between the blasts. “Strange.”

“Not surprised,” Mills replied. “Sounds like the Dems have placed everyone near the bridges.”

“Let’s hope you’re right. Everyone take your wetsuits off. Mills, get ready to cross to that building corner with Jensen and cover us when you get there.” The platoon unzipped their neoprene suits, designed for quick removal, and traded their diving gear for the helmets in their packs in seconds. Mills soon gave the sign for Jensen to follow her across the street into the city. After reaching a nearby building, they turned to cover Samir, Dang and Moretti’s advance. Using this same procedure, they eventually made their way to Foggy Bottom, one of DC’s many metro stations.

“Crap,” Mills whispered on the radio ahead of Samir’s team, seeing four Dem infantry soldiers, dressed in grey fatigues with blue and white insignia, patrolling outside the metro’s escalator entrance. “They haven’t left the station, sir.”

“Copy that,” Samir replied, holding his finger up to the side of his visor to swipe through a city map. “Hold your positions. We’ll flank them.” Samir’s team silently followed an alternate route around the metro entrance, eventually getting behind the guards. “Moretti, Dang, get into position. Mills, spot them.”

“Understood,” Mills copied. “Get ready, Jensen.”

A few seconds passed. “Do it,” Samir suddenly ordered. Mills and Jensen turned the street corner and fired silenced rounds at two Dems in the middle of the patrol, alerting the remaining two. As they rushed to the wounded guards, Moretti and Dang grabbed them from behind and took them down with their knives. The whole procedure lasted a few seconds.

“Lights out,” Moretti said quietly as he laid his guard on the sidewalk.

“Everyone move,” Samir urged as the platoon began their descent into the old DC metro tunnels. While they had been out of service since the Reps took Arlington, the tunnels would serve as the platoon’s means for getting to the National Archives, halfway across the city, quickly and covertly. The only catch was that they would have to make the two mile trip on foot through mostly darkness. “Alright, guys,” Samir said as they jumped onto the tracks of the fluorescent-lit, concrete station. “I want to be at the Archives in fifteen minutes. Night vision on. No lamps.”

The platoon swiped their fingers on the side of their visors to turn the darkness of the tunnel ahead into several shades of visible green. They then proceeded carefully into the tube, not knowing what they would find ahead. The sounds of battle from outside were mostly muffled now, except for the occasional rumble of a nearby blast.

For most of the war, DC had been remarkably unaffected by the battles further south and in the West. Once initial Rep migrations from the city were complete, it was consolidated as a bastion of Dem influence. DC and the other large metropolitan centers of the Northeast and West Coast went on to become the main source of NADC power all these years, despite having much less

land than the RSA. Even further from the war's battles, New York still operated as the cultural and financial hub it always was. LA still produced movies and TV shows for NADC residents. And Chicago. Chicago as well as Detroit had been revived as industrial centers for producing the tanks, ammo and other military supplies needed to keep the Reps at bay.

What the Eastern NADC didn't use was shipped to the West via cargo ships passing through the Panama Canal. These cargo ships were easily protected since the NADC, controlling the entire West Coast as well as Annapolis, had taken the lion's share of the Old US's Navy, just as the RSA had taken more of its Army and Air Force. The Dems were even able to secure the Naval assets at Norfolk before it was recently captured by the Reps. However, due to the sheer size of the RSA in relation to the NADC, its larger focus on relevant policies and the fact that the NADC was still a separated state, many experts agreed that the RSA outperformed the NADC economically.

This is all, of course, not to say that the world itself didn't feel the effects of the United States' Second Civil War. To even pass through the Panama Canal, NADC leaders had to work out complex treaties with the Panamanian government as well as the country that really ran the canal, China. The NADC also had a quid pro quo relationship with Canada to the north. Canada would allow non-military NADC products and supplies to travel from coast to coast using its railways and roads in exchange for liberal trade access to the NADC's cities. Understandably, this had led to bitter relations with the RSA. Mexico, on the other hand, was an odd friend of the Republicans, mostly because the RSA needed them to be. In lieu of not having access to the Old US's West Coast, Republican leaders had worked out complicated deals giving the RSA access to what little international trade still existed on the Pacific via Mexico's coastal cities.

Many international organizations and treaties the Old US was involved in had nonetheless fallen apart since 2025, including the UN and the World Trade Organization, and the world economy had largely devolved into continental trading blocs. In the regions where the US military used to maintain some sense of order, stronger power quickly overcame weaker power. Several would-be military dictators had now become full-fledged emperors. If any global order was still maintained, it was due to the new most powerful country on Earth, China, which dictated outcomes where it had large interests at stake.

Yet world affairs were not on the minds of Samir and his platoon at that moment, nor on the minds of anyone in the RSA or NADC with the exception of politicians in the highest positions. Seeking to use what little influence their respective governments had left, both sides sought the support of international powers in vanquishing their enemy. Little, however, had come their way.

"Four hundred meters to the Archives station, sir," Mills said quietly without loss of breath.

"How the heck ..." a winded Moretti started to ask, "... are you not ... breathing out your ..."

"Not the time, Moretti," Samir said, stopping him. "Those are the lights of the station. Night vision off." He looked at his watch. "Pick up the pace, everyone. Prepare for contact at the station exit." The platoon collectively squinted as the light of the station got brighter. The short run through the tunnels had strangely been a calming experience. Separation from the sights and

sounds of battle can do that. Yet it was time to ascend, and as they jogged up the old immobile escalators to the lit streets above, that familiar anxiety returned.

“Mills, what’s it look like?” Samir whispered over the radio from further down the escalators.

“Nothing, sir,” Mills replied from outside the station with Jensen. “There’s no one out here. Sounds like there’s some tank and helicopter movement on the other side of the Mall, but it’s all going towards the river.”

“We’re coming out.”

The platoon convened near the station exit. The rain had stopped, and the cloud cover seemed to be thinning. Various business and governmental office buildings towered over them, seeming to lean in and listen as they figured out their next move.

“It is true,” Dang said while looking around with her visor set to infrared, otherwise known as heat vision. “It’s about time our little diversion did the trick.”

“I still don’t like it,” Mills commented.

“Agreed,” Samir nodded. “Alright, everyone. Let’s get this doc and get the hell out of DC. There can still be *Phantoms* on the rooftops, and even infrared can’t find them. Jensen, is the case prepped?”

Samir nodded to the high-tech, metal and glass cylinder swinging from Jensen's shoulder.

“Ready to carry really old pieces of paper as it will ever be, sir,” he responded.

“That’s what I like to hear. Mills, get ready to take point with Moretti and Dang this time. Remember, even with an invasion, security may be heavy in and around the Archives.”

It wasn’t. The platoon surprisingly found no security outside the Old United States’ National Archives. The large limestone building loomed above them in the dark, eerily not lit-up like the other important buildings on the National Mall. Its monumental structure was nonetheless imposing. Looking like a Greek temple that could just as easily be found on the Acropolis, the National Archives Building was, like many of America’s wonders, built during the Great Depression, a time when people yearned to remember the glory of the past in hopes of finding inspiration for the future. Yet even as America overcame the challenges of the Depression and tackled New Frontiers, the Archives Building remained, a physical embodiment of the very foundations the country was built upon.

“How nice of the ol’ Demies,” Moretti said while staring up at the stone pillars of the building’s façade. “Shows you the respect they have for the Founding. Constitution will probly be crumpled up, too.”

“Only one way to find out,” Dang said, looking to Samir.

The dark Archives Building caused Samir to feel a twinge of fear. While the war had made him a soldier, he had always been an academic at heart. He loved learning world history and philosophy at Chapel Hill even though he’d never admit it to his classmates. As this mission

progressed, he couldn't help but remember learning about the siege of Jerusalem by the Babylonians in 587 BC. That siege resulted in the Ark of the Covenant being lost to history forever. "Mills, Jensen and Dang, follow me inside," he eventually ordered. "You mind keeping a lookout out here, Moretti?"

"Sir?" Mills asked, confused. The original plan involved splitting the team up between the Archives security rooms and the rotunda where the documents were displayed.

Samir looked at her in frustration. "Just trust me, guys. I don't think this will take long." He and the others quickly passed through the building's security entrance, only to find the interior of the building ominously dark and lifeless as well. "Don't even tell me," Samir kept whispering under his breath as he walked briskly through its halls, remembering from his middle school field trip where the rotunda was. He rounded the corners and climbed the stairs, illuminating the old signs laid out for tourists with the flashlight on his assault rifle.

"Sir, you want to tell us what's going on?" Dang asked while looking around and keeping her rifle readied. Samir didn't hear her. The inside of the Archives looked much like a cathedral, consisting of the kind of old architecture that, whether intentionally or unintentionally, gave off a pseudo-sacred feeling even when it was not illuminated. The group's steps echoed and came back to them as they neared the rotunda. A familiar smell started to fill the air. The smell of a recent gunfight.

"Damn it, Samir!" Mills finally yelled as she kept up with him. "You owe your people an explanation. We've deviated too far from the ..." Mills stopped mid-sentence as they turned a corner, and Samir shone his light into the large room they had been looking for. "... plan," she quietly concluded as she looked up at a gaping hole in the semi-domed ceiling of the rotunda.

The rotunda was an ornate semicircular room built for displaying the founding documents of the nation. To the left and right were large murals of the respective presentations of the Declaration and Constitution by the Founding Fathers. Below the murals were the document display cases, the Declaration's being on the left, and the Constitution's being on the right. Just under the hole, which was really more of a cylindrical shaft, a pile of concrete, stone, and other debris sat strewn out on the floor, as if a meteor had suddenly crashed through. Through the shaft, Samir could see a full moon, which gave the otherwise dark room a gloomy white tint. The rain had ceased, and the cloud cover moved away, only to leave questions in its wake. "OK," Jensen began to ask, "how did our stealth satellites or ... *no one* at Central Command possibly know about a huge hole in our target building?"

"I'm afraid to say," Samir replied while clearing his throat and walking towards the display cases, "that this may have just happened, DJ."

The rest of the group pulled their eyes away from the hole to finally realize what Samir had feared. In place of both the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution were nothing but the bare glass cases that used to contain them. The bulletproof glass on each case had somehow been precisely cut to allow each document to pass through, and before them lay several bodies of what was the Dem security force tasked with guarding the Archives.

“These guys never saw it coming,” said Dang solemnly, walking over to them and picking up one of the bullet shells scattered on the floor. “This shell is still warm, sir. Who, or what, could have done all this?”

“Someone who knew our plan and beat us to it,” a frustrated Mills suggested, reaching to her ear to work the radio. “CENTCOM, this is Alpha Team in the Archives. The document is gone and several Dem guards have died in a recent firefight. How did we not hear about this?” Mills walked off for a minute while trying to get a response.

“Sir, the power being cut off to the building must have been part of the attack plan,” Jensen offered. “Who we see here are all the Dems had to spare to protect the Archives. What troubles me are the bullet shells.”

“How so?” the disappointed Samir asked while contemplating one of the murals on the wall.

“Well, they appear to only be from the Dems’ rifles. There’s no sign of any other type of gun’s bullets. And the ... the wounds of the guards. Those aren’t from bullets, sir. They’re more like ...”

“Burns,” Dang said grimly, finishing his thought.

“Exactly. The kind you would expect to see from a laser. But the only attack lasers both sides have right now are heavy, stationary ones used for high-altitude air defense. Some prototype tanks have tried them, too, I think. They’re heavy because of the huge power sources they need. These look like they came from smaller, hand-held weapons.”

“And that’s a huge jump in technology,” Dang commented, looking up at the sky through the hole. “I think we need to take the next logical step in our investigation, sir. *Aliens*.”

“The humor is appreciated, Dang,” Samir replied sardonically, moving to read the signs hanging over each display case.

“Another thing, too, is that hole,” Jensen continued. “Any conventional air attack over the city would have immediately been shot down. That’s why we took the tunnels to get here. Something like this had to come from ... well, from space.”

“Holy crap. Are we actually talking about aliens, here?” Dang asked, surprised and somewhat scared.

“No, no,” Jensen responded while waving his hand. “We’ve been working on missiles and orbital dive vehicles that could get past the Dems’ laser defense grids for years. This is definitely a human job, but one that was done with technology more advanced than either side has right now. Nothing shows that more than how they actually took the documents. We had a complex plan involving this place’s underground security rooms. These guys, whoever they are, seem to have somehow whisked them away with ease.”

“You don’t think ... China or Russia, maybe?” Samir turned and asked after a second.

“I ... can’t tell right now. I’ll have to take some pics and samples.”

“Do it quickly.”

Jensen pulled out his datapad to take pictures of the crime scene while Samir looked back at the murals of the Founding Fathers, only to be disturbed by a strange sensation seconds later. It was a slight twinge in the back of his neck, not quite as painful as a bee sting, but enough to make him raise up his hand to swipe whatever had attacked him. Sounds of gunfire and explosions rocked the air outside the hole, sounding much closer than the fighting at the river, and his strange pain soon subsided.

Mills then walked back to the group. “Say again, CENTCOM,” she was shouting into the radio. “Did you read me on the evac? CENTCOM, come in!”

“What now?” Samir asked tiredly.

“Command didn’t even know about the hole. Everything’s hectic because the Dems are pushing us back over the river. I advise we get out of here now, sir.”

“Agreed. I’m assuming they can’t spare a copter then?” The group collectively looked to Mills. Looking up, she shook her head.

“Commander, come in!” Moretti’s voice then shouted over the radio amidst gunfire.

“This is Nashwari,” Samir immediately answered.

“More Dems have come from the opposite direction of the river and are about to pin me down! I think they want the Archives back!”

Samir bit his lower lip and rolled his eyes in frustration. “We’re coming out, now. Rap it up, DJ.”

The group rushed out of the rotunda and back to the security entrance. Before leaving, Samir took one last look at the murals and empty display cases. Many scenes in the past five years had reminded him of just how much the war had changed America, but this one was particularly powerful. The men who died defending the documents were American, he thought, regardless of which side they were on. He sadly knew many of his fellow Reps would disagree.

The group of four ran out of the Archives entrance and were immediately met with infantry gunfire from the east. Moretti had taken a defensive position behind a cement wall facing the street. Keeping low, Samir rushed to meet him. “Report!” he yelled into Moretti’s ear as he fired at the approaching Dems. “They came out of nowhere, sir! I thought all their forces were down by the river! What the heck did you guys find in there!?”

“Nothing but Dead Dems!”

“So nothing! *MDD* I always say. No reason to defend the building, then!”

Samir peeked his head over the wall to assess the situation. The Dems were blocking their way back to the metro station. He also didn’t want to take his team out on the open Mall to the south. “We have to break line and retreat west down this street!” he yelled to everyone while checking his visor’s navigation system. “Down Constitution Avenue!”

The platoon collectively shrugged at the irony before Mills posed a question. “And how do you suggest we do that, sir?”

She had a point. The Dems seemed to be coming from all directions, and an open run down the Mall would mean certain death. Samir then spotted a run-down, purple minivan parked nearby that had evidently been abandoned before the invasion. He quickly hatched a plan. “DJ, do you see that minivan!?”

“Hooyah, sir! You thinking what I’m thinking!?”

“We’ll cover you! Good luck!” Samir reached to his side to grab a grenade, containing advanced smoke that could block even infrared detection, and threw it in front of the vehicle. As the canister hurled grey smoke into the night air, he then gave a sign for the entire team to start firing at the Dems while Jensen sprinted to the minivan. In no time, he had thrown open the passenger side door and was furiously working on the wires beneath the steering wheel, all while taking care to stay low. The smoke grenade did its trick. *Vrrrooom!* The old manual minivan’s engine roared, or rather purred, back to life. Samir gave the order, and soon the entire platoon piled in.

“The 395’s going to be horrible at this hour, sir,” Moretti joked from the back seat.

“Let’s hope we can even make it to the 395,” Samir replied as he grabbed the steering wheel, shifted to drive and slammed the gas pedal to the floor. The purple wreck bolted from the cloud of smoke, faster than he expected, and began to make its way down Constitution Avenue.

Driving on the National Mall while escaping people trying to kill him was understandably surreal for Samir. For years Reps had been excluded from DC. It was only fitting to be forcefully pushed away from the white dome under which the war started. It was only fitting to be excluded an hour after arriving.

Samir was originally planning to head to the metro entrances near the White House, but Dem reinforcements were now coming from the north, as well. He would have to try a new plan. Among the reinforcements were familiar, terrifying shapes, illuminated by the ghostly white moon above.

“*Rail-tanks!*” Mills yelled from the back seat amidst bullets pinging off the back of the minivan. Instead of using conventional cannons, rail-tanks used electromagnets to accelerate shells, and were that much more destructive. *Boom! Boom!* Samir swerved to avoid shot after shot from the behemoths, which were now chasing the vehicle along with Dem infantry. The city itself seemed to be engulfing them. The Rep invasion had failed, and they were now paying dearly for it.

Samir struggled to stay down yet still keep the van moving. Through the broken glass and shrapnel in the air he could see more Dem tanks turning onto the road ahead of them. There were strangely few times in the war when he had to make decisions endangering his entire platoon. Normally there were at least some people left back for strategic or logistical reasons. This night wasn’t normal. He soon swerved to the left and over the curb separating them from the trees and shrubbery of the National Mall.

“I like where this is going!” Moretti shouted while bouncing around. “I just found some Cheetos back here!”

“You’re disgusting, man!” Jensen jeered from the passenger seat, hanging on tightly to the dashboard as the minivan limped its way across grass and in-between trees. *Screeeeech!* Samir turned just before driving into the water of the Reflecting Pool and sped towards the steps of the Lincoln Memorial.

“If you’re doing what I think you’re doing, let’s hope it works!” cried Mills, realizing his plan.

“It’s our only chance!” Samir replied. Without even braking, he drove the minivan up the lower steps of the monument, popping two of its tires and forcing it to stop at an angle. “Everybody out!”

The platoon flooded from the purple doors and up the steps while bullets hit the stone around them. *Boom!* A rail-tank shell blew up the minivan just as they got out of the way. The familiar ringing a nearby explosion causes returned to Samir’s ears. Exhausted, he looked down at the white marble steps he was running up. Red dots seemed to follow him on his right side. It was only then that he noticed his shoulder had been grazed by a piece of shrapnel.

Wounds were relatively commonplace to Makos and other Special Ops units. Their training had taught them to push through the pain and keep fighting if the injury wasn’t fatal, to keep steady even at the loss of a friend. Samir nonetheless regretted soiling this place. From blood, gunfire and exhaustion, he looked up to see the eyes of Abraham Lincoln looking back at him. The Lincoln Memorial was a massive, multi-columned building modelled after the Greek Doric temples of old, and just like the National Archives, it was meant to give off a feeling of sacredness despite it being an officially secular structure. On the walls of the temple inside were inscribed two of Lincoln’s greatest speeches, and at its center sat a thirty foot statue of the man himself, gazing out over the Reflecting Pool in front of the temple and the country he died for beyond.

Running in between the pillars at the entrance, Samir stumbled and took cover with the rest of his platoon. The sounds of war had eased save for a few stray gun shots. Could his plan have worked? “Everybody get further inside,” he ordered. “Jensen and Dang, watch the doors over there. Mills, to me.” The two officers peeked out from behind one of the entrance pillars for a few seconds, only to be met with sporadic gun shots pinging off the stone around them.

“Man!” Mills exclaimed. “Maybe this wasn’t ...”

“Shh,” Samir stopped her. “Listen. Their officers are ordering to hold fire.”

“No way,” Dang commented while guarding one of the service doors in the monument. “Maybe even the Dems will respect this place.”

“Maybe,” Samir responded. “Still, someone shoot out the ceiling lights. Those won’t cost much to fix.”

“Will do,” said Moretti, gladly pointing his rifle up in the air.

“Everybody stay back and covered,” Samir then urged. “I don’t think they’ll send a tank shell in here, but a rogue Dem feeling lucky could hit you if you’re exposed.”

“What now?” Mills asked him. “They’re surrounding the place.”

“We establish a perimeter. A line they can’t cross. Moretti, I want you on first watch. Don’t let anyone walk up those steps if they look threatening.”

“Samir,” Mills whispered to him as they turned to walk towards the statue of Lincoln, seated as if contemplating their strategy for them, “this is too easy. Have they really stopped just because they don’t want to scuff up a monument?”

“I think that’s a big factor,” he replied and then pointed to the document carrying case swinging from Jensen’s shoulder, “but I also think *they* think we have the documents ... at least for now.”

Mills sighed. “Well, I guess if we don’t know what exactly happened at the Archives, they don’t either. How do we get out of here, though?”

“That ... I need to think on. Until then, have a look around! This place is *full* of history!”

Mills shook her head and walked away, turning a second later. “That better not be the real reason we came here, nerd!” Samir looked at her and jokingly touched a finger to his nose.