

JIHAD

TARGET AMERICA



T. RANDALL



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Fiction

By

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JIHAD – TARGET AMERICA

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Attack on the Nation – The United States of America – Fiction.

First addition.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

ISBN: 978-0-9897380-1-9 Soft Copy

ISBN: 978-0-9897380-2-6 EPUB Copy

ISBN: 978-0-9897380-3-3 Hard Copy

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PUBLISHER:

IngramSpark Print-On-Demand

Ingram Book Distribution for eBook:

Ingram Book Company

One Ingram Blvd.

La Vergne, TN 37086

<http://www.ingrambook.com/default.aspx>

Printed in the United States of America

First Printing May 2017

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

DISCLAIMER

JIHAD – TARGET AMERICA is fictional in nature, using fictitious names for all characters. Locations and events are suggested possibilities based on the current political state of national and world events. The Jihad flag, depicted specifically for this novel, is not intended to degrade in any way the honor of its nation or the citizens who were fighting for their causes, patriotic, religious or otherwise. The flag, as illustrated on the cover page, is only a reflection of the intense storyline of this novel.

Although the author spent twenty-five years working as a government contractor and, at times, had access to highly sensitive information inherent to the Intelligence community, it is not his intention to disclose any sensitive or classified materials to the public or to the enemies of the free world.

While the author has intricate knowledge of organizational and governmental structures in the arenas of intelligence, defense, and science and technologies as described in this book, some information was extracted from public encyclopedia sources.

The author hereby thanks and acknowledges the many sources for their efforts for keeping the public informed and in contributing specific information whether willingly or through the liberties of the Freedom of Information Act.

FOREWORD

JIHAD – TARGET AMERICA is a comprehensive work based on the vulnerability of the United States defense system. Making up the chapters are dozens of characters and organizations necessary that are dependent on each other in the case of an all-out attack on the nation. In addition, a number of sections, traumatizing the lives of American citizens affected by a said attack, are illustrated.

This story, the third book in the trilogy PENTAGON’S HAMMER, is a continuation from Book I (12 DAYS TO ARMAGEDDON) and Book II (FORSAKEN FREEDOM), played out on the shores of the New Republic.

The adversary and leader of the assault, Hasan Hammad, Supreme Commander, principal jihad delegate to fight the New Republic and the free world, flanked by his team of highly trained and educated terrorists, is at his best. Targeted for destruction by the adversary is not only the newly created nation, but its vital facilities as well. Where the premise of the first book was a direct Jihad assault on the Americans using Electromagnetic Pulsing (EMP) as a weapon with the second assault in book two using High-Frequency Active Auroral Research Program (HAARP) as a weapon, the foundation for this novel is based on Jihad’s initiative in using current technology for the attained destructive powers to the country. Hasan Hammad, Jihad’s supreme leader’s intentions, with the support from his ruthless taskforce is to get his hands on the New Republic’s infrastructure for squashing the free nation’s contrary practices, legal, secular, and religious to the beliefs of the Islamic faith.

As always, the adversary, based on his ingenuity and savvy, achieves his means to an end but not without getting severe resistance from Alex and his Castle crew of righteous defenders for their country. Also, the purpose of this story, aside from presenting a meaningful novel reflecting on the current political climate and international affairs, merged into the storyline, is to pass along as much information and data as possible, nationally and internationally, to explain the magnitude of the impact potential on the country’s economic state and its citizen’s wellbeing.

Book III, after its two predecessors, Book I and Book II, has grown alongside a current global threat that is very real, that of factions such as Jihad, ISIS, al Qaeda, Mosat, Mujahideen, Taliban, and more. It is this threat that the author is trying to bring awareness to the reader not only from an adversary viewpoint, but antagonistic perspective, as well, presenting both

sides of man's age old struggles, that of Islam pitted against Christianity, for the purpose of survival. Where both factions, at various times, are seeking world dominance, only one winner is allowed to emerge. As long as its fundamentalists are unwilling to change, the struggle will prevail. Regardless of intentions, whether benevolent or malevolent, it is nature's way for the survival of the fittest.

For the reader to obtain the full breadth for the basis of these opposing forces, as part of the storyline, a number of critical fundamentals are examined namely, Sharia Law, Five Pillars of Islam, Principles of Terrorist indoctrinations and cultures, including a list of global terrorist organizations, and more as listed in the Appendix sections.

As stated by the principle character, Alex, "There is a distinct difference between Muslim traditional culture and embracing Sharia Law. Where tradition serves the people, the other serves the law, both closely tied in with Islamic legal practices. Where in the eyes of Islam the ancient, archaic practices of justice may have served its culture, today, it is viewed by the free world as oppressive, brutal, cruel, and merciless. It is this view that cause the religious clashes between nations subjugated to external pressures from the Muslim migrant, forced by Islamic practices on the western world.

Regardless of current world economic states and faltering international relations, this book shall serve as a warning, as well as educating the citizens of the free world for things to come. We have not seen the end of mankind's struggles and never will unless we make serious amendments towards treating each other with the dignity, respect, and sophistication, we all deserve.

The Book is the author's finest work yet, but nothing for what is to come with his upcoming work.

LIST OF CHARACTERS

CAST OF PRINCIPLE CHARACTERS

Alex Bauer – Code name “Specter.” Defense analyst, home base Castle Rock, CO

Lisa “Liz” Bauer – Code name “Tempest,” former astronaut, Vandenberg AFB, CA

Scott Brooks – Code name “Black Knight.” Naval operative, Sea Dogs, New Republic

Tracy Bauer – Code name “Stinger.” NSA defense strategist, home base Castle Rock, CO

SUPPORT CAST – NEW REPUBLIC

Allen Spencer – aka The Psychic, Group Leader, Ravens, Sector Two, Northern Plains

Benjamin “Ben” Jackson – Commanding General, CINCNORAD, C/S, CO

Brodie Elliott – Command Sergeant Major, 1st Armored Division, Badlands, Fort Knox, KY

Carol – Executive staff member, NERC, Atlanta, GA

Craig Cummings – Traveling encounter with Tracy, home-based Silicon Valley, CA

Darrel Hendrix, Colonel, USAF, Flight Squadron Commander, Elmendorf AFB, AK

Emmett W. Fletcher – Four Star Admiral, Flag Officer, NATO, European Command

Gary Walters – General, AF, Mojave Desert, Edwards AFB, CA

George Jefferson Wilson – Ambassador to the U.N., New Republic, DC

Greg Willis – Military liaison to General Foster, Base Command, McGuire AFB, NJ

Harry Carter – Chief of Operations, CIA HQ, Langley, VA

Jack Warner – Chief of Operations, NSA HQ, Fort Meade, MD

Lee Blackwell – Colonel, Full-Bird, AF, Vandenberg AFB, CA

Larry Larson – Executive Director, NERC, Atlanta, GA

Mark Evans – Plant Manager, Indian Point, nuclear power plant, NY

Nolan Bradley and wife Rose – Business Tycoon, Vacationing

Phil – Executive staff member, NERC, Atlanta, GA

Rhonda Hicks – Chief of Operations, Vandenberg AFB, CA

Russell Wilcox – Unit Leader, Penitentiary, Fort Leavenworth, KS
Rusty Norton – Elected Leader, New Republic, White House, Washington, DC
Wendell Nelson – Commander, Garrison, Army, Fort Knox, KY

SUPPORT CAST – HYDRA FLEET

Andrew “Hawk” Hawkins – Submarine Commander, Pacific Fleet, NAVCOM, Marianas
Henry “Hank” Foster – Code name “Crimson.” Commanding General, Four Star, New Republic
Jake Martin – Plant Manager, NPCC Authority, Project Hydra, Yonkers, NY
Patrick “Pat” Wilkinson – Admiral, Commander Pacific Fleet, Guam, Marianas Islands
Scott Brooks – Code name “Black Night.” Naval operative, Sea Dogs, New Republic
Wesley “Wes” Lewis – Air Wing Commander, Marine detachment, Aircraft Carrier

SUPPORT CAST – FOREIGN SECTOR

Byron Patterson, Secretary General, United Nations, New York, NY
Chang Li – Maritime Captain, Sea Van Rising Star, Hang Zhou, China
Chongan Zheng – Admiral, Pacific Fleet, People’s Republic of China, Hong Kong
Fang Wong – Chinese Ambassador to the Russian Federation, Beijing, China
Hui Wong – Party Secretary, People’s Republic of China, Beijing, China
Manchu Cheng – Minister of Defense, People’s Republic of China, Beijing
Jingguo Jiang – Colonel, Wing Command, Air Defense Forces, Shenyang, China
Juan – Hind pilot, Mexican Air Defense, Military base, Chihuahua, MX
Kazim Rashid – Secretary General, U.N., former Tribal Elder, Al Qaeda/Jihad, Pakistan
Mikhail Azarov – Chernoff’s Air Commander, Siberia Region, Vladivostok, Russia
Nikolai Chernoff – Chairman, Prime Minister, Russian Federation, Moscow, Russia

Pepe – Hind copilot, Mexican Air Defense, Military base, Chihuahua, MX

SUPPORT CAST – JIHAD COMMAND

Amin Madani – Action Officer, Jihad Mission Command, Islamabad, Pakistan

Antarah Radi – Mission Commander, Jihad, Central Sector, Chicago, IL

Bandar Malik – First Lieutenant, Jihad, Cell Alpha, New York, NY

Hakim Massoud – First Lieutenant, Cell Central, Chicago, IL

Jamuh Faisal – First Lieutenant, Jihad, South Cell, Miami, FL

Joseph (Yusuf) Hashim – Commander, Jihad, All Sectors, HQ, NY

Rashid Abu – Base Commander, Al Qaeda, Jihad, Desert Base Alpha, Sudan

Sahib Mahmud – Agent, Jihad, Khartoum Cell, Sudan

Tariq Amman – First Lieutenant, Cell East, Washington, DC

PART ONE NATIONAL EMERGENCY

ANOTHER SUNNY DAY

You may have just awakened from a pleasant dream, gotten up from the comfort of the bed, completed your daily morning ritual, jumped into a fresh set of clothes, or headed for the kitchen, invited by the aroma of a freshly-brewed cup of coffee before turning on the TV to catch the morning news and traffic reports, and joining the happy chatter of your family gathered for a quick breakfast before taking to the road. It may be the general backdrop of the ideal family setting, whether back in the '50s, or today in the fast-paced lifestyle of a technology-obsessed generation.

Stepping out, take a moment to absorb what you have just accomplished: The first segments of a ritual most of us face during our daily tasks in trying to carve out a decent living. It did not matter who you are or what position you held in society or your personal goals and individual accomplishments; what mattered was the environment you have either created or are presently a part of, a space where you feel secure.

Stepping out, take a good look around you. It may be the last time you could enjoy the rewards of your hard-earned prosperity. A day of rudimentary tasks at the office, the pleasures at shopping, or whatever you have set out to accomplish today, a typical day we take for granted, could shatter at any moment.

It may happen today. It could come tomorrow, or maybe not until next year or the year after. But rest assured, the day will come when your life will be turned upside down within the blink of an eye. It will be a day of reckoning. It will be a day when we realize how vulnerable and fragile we have become, not only as human beings, but also as a nation. A nation, once a powerful icon among world leadership, in an instant could crumble to the level of a third-world country, filled with chaos and struggle for survival. It could happen to any land on the globe. It has happened over and over since the dawn of mankind. The reasons could be many, from drought causing famine, to natural disaster from volcanic eruption, climactic change due to distractive solar activity and asteroid hits, but most likely and more realistically through an inborn characteristic for conflicts and war. Man, in its wondrous creation, regardless of individual aspirations for peace and prosperity, is a warring people, which have been proven over and over for millennia.

One needs only to take a look at economically-collapsed nations such as Iraq, Afghanistan, and Somalia to get the idea. However, the severity of a collapse can only be gauged to its fullest extent when actually living there. Viewed remotely through news and media channels, individual impressions can only be felt through a sense of detached presence. Unless directly connected with relatives and friends, time and distance places you outside any given conflict and location of turmoil. Where does that leave us, the ones not involved? All we can do is lend compassion, understanding, and support to the afflicted, hoping it will never happen to us.

CASTLE ROCK, COLORADO

“Morning, sleepyhead,” Alex cheered as he turned in the direction of the approaching steps. It would be his daughter Tracy joining him for breakfast. Like most mornings, he had it already prepared by the time she showed up.

“Morning, Dad, smells good.”

“Should,” he replied. “It’s your favorite.” Her main meal of the day had always been in late morning. The aroma combination from the bacon and eggs, grits, English muffins, and freshly-brewed coffee permeating through the floors was enough to completely wake her up. Being a night owl, and not required to be at any office or job location, she usually slept in. She liked it that way. Thinking back, he could not remember her ever owning an alarm clock getting up at the sound of the alarm.

“What’s your plan for today?” Alex opened the morning dialogue while eating breakfast. He shot a quick glance at her to see if she was dressed up for the road or clad leisurely for staying home. These days, it was mostly the two of them since Rhonda was employed at an office. She was at the Pentagon working directly for Foster. It appeared that the nation was on its way to healing itself after years of economic chaos and turmoil.

“Think I’ll head for town,” she replied.

“Why don’t you stay?” he suggested. “I think we should talk.” The “talk” had been expected for some time. It was not that it was detrimental or urgent at this time, but it was necessary for both of them. While Alex had been content with her presence at the Castle since her return from battle, as the organized individual he was, he felt that everybody needed a plan and direction for moving forward. Finished eating, he did not wait for a response but followed her when he saw her headed toward the deck. Just like most days in the foothills of the Rockies it promised to be another sunny, cloudless day this time of year with spring in the air. The picturesque setting of the nation’s predominant mountain peaks, aside from projecting an inspiring atmosphere, held hope and promises, which seemed to soothe nerves when tensed up with problems and concerns.

Glancing expectantly at him, after getting comfortable on the deck furniture, she said, “What’s on your mind?” Alex took his time to respond. He was glad his daughter was alive and sitting next to him after what she’d experienced for the last several years, with one deadly confrontation after another, and there were many. He wanted to prolong the moment because he suspected it would not last long. Knowing his daughter’s behavior to exist

and flourish, it would not take long for her to seek out new action and adventure, just like he did at her age.

“Listen,” he finally said into the serenity of the morning, his head turned toward the open space. “The birds are back.” They both lingered in their own thoughts, with his on the past and hers on the future, wondering what steps to take next. With battle fronts eliminated, Tracy seemed directionless. Recent months and years of tumultuous battle fronts had been resolved under the combined strengths of her fighting abilities, Alex’s support, Elliott’s patriots, Big Red’s army, and Scott Brook’s ruthlessness. Under General Foster’s command and directions, the enemy had been eliminated and removed from American soil, purged, but for how long was anybody’s guess.

Neither of them knew the answer at this time but as sure as there was a tomorrow, it would not be the last conflict or battle for long. As long as man was the dominant being on Earth, there would always be fighting, confrontation, and war. Tracy patiently waited in silence, expecting an answer from him. “Well?” she prodded him once more. Alex did not respond. Where his goal was clearly focused on the future and what needed to be done, he suspected that Tracy’s directions and purpose for a meaningful purpose may have been lost in the turmoil. Where it was a new beginning with a wealth of opportunities for him, for her, it seemed the purpose for her very existence was in jeopardy. To reestablish her confidence, both knew it would demand lengthy discussions in the days ahead based on the recent events.

While waiting for Alex to respond, Tracy recalled some of the important phases, causes she had been drawn into battles. After waging several conflicts with the enemy, the Jihad forces had all but been driven from American soil. Hammad, the Serpent-turned-Prophet, had been eliminated by Tracy during their last bout in the Straits of Hormuz amidst a devastating cyclone in the offshore waters of Dubai near his headquarters, Palm Jumeirah. What remained in the new nation, the New Republic, other than the country’s inheriting citizens, were peace-loving Muslim settlers dispersed mostly along the shores of the Eastern Seaboard, seeking new homes for a peaceful future. It seemed that everybody deserved a break from the constant onslaughts of the Prophet, Islam’s warring forces commanded by Hasan Hammad, elected supreme leader who sought dominance and control, in the process affecting every society and faith on the planet.

After extensive reconstruction, the United Nations was slowly regaining its celebrated world status once more, including rebuilding their headquarters

on Manhattan's eastern riverfront. Massive construction was also underway to rebuild bridges and causeways destroyed by Jihad. The Lincoln and Holland tunnels crossing the Hudson River were still under construction, and would be for many months to come, to repair their collapse from mega explosives centered within the submerged tunnel structures.

Washington, DC's national airport, the White House, the Capitol, and other historic and monumental sites were undergoing similar reconstruction efforts. General Henry "Hank" Foster, upholding the promise he made years ago, was in charge of the Pentagon, iconic defense complex once again. The wealth and treasures acquired and hoarded by a permanently removed Derek Wallace, former Group Leader of the Anarchists, now was in the hands of General Foster and a newly-instituted Department of Treasury.

With the creation of the New Republic came new departments, directorates, political offices, and organizational heads. Applications for office were submitted in troves. It seemed that there was no shortage of politicians and government employees since jobs and laborers for organized industries still needed to be sorted out. It would take many more months of directing individual minds, once corrupted by the old system, to focus on the new establishment forged by the new leadership. Where, during the hardship years, citizens were geared toward individual survival and preservation, now, was enforced by Rusty Norton, leader and President Elect for the new nation.

The War Dogs, led by their incumbent leader Scott Brooks, had been disbanded. Its members were reorganized by Rusty Norton into a more effective fighting force. A new tactical branch was created, that of navy seals, under the direction of the Department of the Navy, with Brooks in charge of tactical assignments. Ever since, there seemed to be no shortfalls of challenges for the team. Dispatched around the globe, whenever and wherever they were needed, the team responded on an hour's notice.

Big Red and her partially disintegrated army had been reorganized into an effective military unit combined and supported by Brodie Elliott, Command Sergeant Major, leading the 1st Armored Division. As for Big Red, as she had envisioned, her diligence paid off. She was elected secretary for the Department of Defense as part of the first constitutional electoral held by the people of the New Republic. With the support from Foster and congressional elected female members, a lasting guarantee was assured for her future successes.

Brodie Elliot and the 1st Armored Division were again placed in charge of

the nation's treasures contained at the Fort Knox armory. It took some time to have Derek Wallace's unlawfully-acquired treasures sorted out, catalogued, classified and returned to their original owners. What acquired treasures remained in the hands of the government had been cleaned up and restored, by Pentagon administrators, to their original iconic power and prestige.

Duke Wheeler, aka Bad Man, Enforcer for the Patriots and the former Badlands, had been placed in charge of all refineries in the new nation. It was a position made in heaven, matching both his character and needs. Happily accepting the position with the support of a very willing and ever-thirsty patriotic team served two purposes. One, he reorganized the process and procedures for breweries as an effective industry with organized accountability, orders and deliveries, and two, it reacquired and reorganized the mining operations necessary to fuel the nation's economy, transportation, and its people into affluence and prosperity. Where, in the interim, fossil fuel was still considered as a primary energy source, great efforts were initiated by private and national laboratories in devising and developing alternative energy sources. The effort, though slow at first, was increasingly adopted into the economic fabric of the land.

Rusty Norton, former Group Leader for the Patriots, Sector One, Badlands and Central Plains, was elevated to president and Commander in Chief for the New Republic with the first officially held election. While previously incarcerated for five years at Leavenworth for rebellious behavior, he proved very capable as leader of the nation. Under his leadership and strictly enforced policies, the new order gradually regained the prestigious international status the former United States of America held. It became especially notable after banking, trade, and currency had been reinstated and reissued. Not repeating past misdeeds by money handlers, new offices were established and staffed with citizens of integrity to assure proper checks and balances.

The New Republic, after being officially sanctioned by world congress, made rapid strides toward regaining the identity and recognition as the leading nation once bestowed on American. After the reestablished currency was accepted, international trade and commerce began to flourish. Instituting and enforcing new governing rules and political policies, many nations embraced the newly forming trends of honesty, integrity, and sincerity enthusiastically. Others, more conservative with strong cultural orientations, trying to preserve their national heritages, were more reluctant to align. In the

end, it did not matter. As facts had it, those countries were respected by keeping their inherited customs and cultures alive for the preservation and enjoyment of all people. After all, where would diversity be for human tradition and birthright, were it not for an inherited legacy. It was this legacy that enabled all of us to enjoy the riches and diversities of foreign customs and cultures.

Hasan Hammad, once renowned Prophet and notorious leader, responsible for the forced expansion of the Islamic cause, as far as the world was concerned, perished along with the ultimate fight for dominance, destroyed by his feared, as well as revered, fight worthy opponent, Tracy Bauer, also known as Stinger. Heralded while in power but short lived in fame Hammad was mourned by all of his followers. Once a great inspiration to the future cause of Islam, with a life cut unceremoniously short, he was buried with honors, nevertheless. There was, however, a secret hidden from the world that only his trusted friend and revered servant knew. It was a secret that would be revealed to the world in due time. Saved at the last second from drowning by Yusuf, it would take many months for the almost fatal wounds, inflicted by his archenemy Stinger, to heal, after which time the Prophet would emerge once more, but this time with much greater force and vengeance, with a weapon in his hands capable of destroying insubordinate nations and annihilating much of the portion of mankind adverse to his cause. Only he and Allah knew the time.

For now, uncertain of how long peace would last, the Castle, with its proprietor Alex Bauer, his daughters Lisa “Liz” and her kids, Tracy, and his special devotee Rhonda Hicks, was a place of harmony again. A bastion built by Alex, with technology support authorized by and acquired from longtime friend and military superior, General Foster, restored as commander, five star, armed forces was lending its support again to nearby NORAD, still commanded by the egocentric general in charge, Benjamin “Ben” Jackson, Commanding General, CINCNORAD, who regained his solidarity with the Mountain after the reformed presidency, senate, and congress were returned to a stabilized national capital in the District of Columbia.

Despite remnants of instability, for the elect leaders there was much work to be done. Everybody, management as well as employed, strove equally to support the New Republic. Defense, National Guards, and law enforcement were reorganized with newly established guidelines implemented. But this

time, the focus was on managing organizational growth and wellness with the primary focus on fair and proper treatment of the citizens, as stated in the newly revised constitution with its innate birthrights, allowing all citizens their constitutionally-inherited freedom and liberty.

Scott Brooks, former Delta Force operative and commander, a once inferior human being had excelled in becoming a super human warrior. His personal power and strength were unmatched. With peace returned to a nation in turmoil for many years currently in the process of rebuilding again, he found himself at odds with the land and its people. There seemed to be no place for him and his skills in an orderly society. Highly depressed, he longed for excitement and action. To his luck, and due to the very nature of mankind, it was not long before new opportunities presented themselves. It came in the form of global unrest and terrorism on the rise again. Unchecked, due to the former superpower and world police collapse of the United States of America, international terrorism was spreading renewed hostilities, becoming evermore prolific.

An opportunist by nature, Brooks immediately recognized his time had come. All he needed was a sanctioned venue from the New Republic's policy makers. A short time later it came in the form of a tender offer from the Department of the Navy, specifically in a newly formed attack team equivalent to the former Seal 6, surface and subsurface tactical assault unit. It was an ideal match for Brooks, requiring operation in an unnatural habitat—underwater. Brooks was in his element again, enjoying every mission the world threw at him.

Lisa Bauer, spending some well deserved break at the Castle in the company of her kids and family, after barely surviving while serving in orbit on the International Space Station, eventually accepted a position offered by General Foster. After lengthy congressional debates about whether the New Republic should keep supporting the ISS, she became mission director for the revived space agency. Who else would be more appropriate to manage the agency than the sole surviving astronaut from a much troubled space mission, was the common consensus from the panel. Among space experts, she knew more about potential space-related mission failures and how to cope with them than anyone else. At the end, after much deliberation by international space agencies, it was decided not to rebuild the ISS since it had outlived its purpose. With space exploration shifting from government-sponsored missions to commercial enterprises, future functions would be managed and

directed commercially with launches, logistics and support functions coming from NASA. The first missions on the agenda, privately built by competing rocket manufacturers for space readiness, were undergoing severe testing for setting up base stations on the Moon in support for future colonization on Mars and other planets in the solar system. Liz completely enjoyed her newly-acquired responsibilities and did a fine job in directing and managing.

Tracy Bauer felt that she was too radical a person to benefit any of the political organizations. She would have turned down any offers anyway. Where her expertise was in the field of operative and analysis for national defense, due to a multitude of personal dramatizations, her skills had eventually shifted to warding off intrusions on her beloved nation. She had decided to become a fulltime warrior. Heralded as a heroine, there was one position most suitable for her. When offered, she readily accepted. The offer came from the Department of Homeland Security. Though secrecy and clandestine roles were not part of the newly created New Republic, they were unavoidable for any technologically-advanced nation. Tracy was chosen for her personal skills, heading off a newly formed super secret branch under the DHS, the Stinger squadron. It was her mission to infiltrate, penetrate, identify, and, as necessary, eliminate terrorist and adverse elements emerging from any adversary and hostile nation.

Her elite team, while extremely covert in nature, was sought out by many troublesome nations. Without revealing possible future opportunities, it should be mentioned that in only a very short time, Tracy would be called upon by the world council to deploy her special skills once more to ward off imposing threats on the free world.

The deceased body of Brian Harris was buried on the Castle grounds. Through a personal relationship with Tracy, his legacy would live on through the inscribed dedication memorialized on his tombstone: "Here lies the spirit of a revered, but not forgotten, soldier, dedicated to the very end." Tracy and Alex visited his grave often. Although her remembrance of the extreme hardship of the past waned with the passage of time, the memories of not only Brian, but her dearest friend Hannah as well, would always hold a dedicated spot in her heart.

Expectantly shifting her gaze between her hands resting on her legs and Alex, still immersed in silence, Tracy waited for him to talk. "Well?" she said again, expecting a response. Though she had many things on her mind that

needed to be solved, it was Alex that had requested the talk. Patiently waiting some more, she studied her hands. It was then that she noticed the change in them. Her gaze lingered on what used to be soft, feminine, and giving hands. Now, she thought with slight regret, just look at them. They were as firm and hard as tissue could be. Her hands had turned into an equivalent extension of her body: conditioned, trained, and solid, but still capable of giving. The last thought, reflecting a distant past, brought a grin to her face. Giving, she reflected, did not mean handing out gifts. By giving, she meant dishing out punches, blows, and strikes, connecting with an opponent's face, ribs, and guts, as many of her combat opponents could attest to. With many successfully repelled and subdued, some carried scars for life. A few paid with their lives. It was this legacy that formed her presence, that of the New Republic. For now, she patiently waited for Alex to respond. Though anxious to talk, there was no immediate urgency for solving her problems of uncertainties. Dad would talk when he was good and ready. When he did, his directions were clear and precise.

BALTIMORE HARBOR

It was just another day in the lives of some three hundred sixty million people going about their daily lives. It was late morning. Some were sitting through another boring hour of business meetings, operating desktop computer, working designs, composing documents or just playing games on an iPhone. Others not strapped to the desk were hastening to a doctor's appointment, meeting a friend or heading for the nearest mall. More were checking the clock anxious not to miss the lunch break. Daily habits were more or less the same whether someone was living in the city, town, or country. People developed the same rudimentary pattern linked to the immediate environment, with some accepting their lives as it was, and others hoping for a much needed change. One such individual was Scott Brooks, former Delta Force operative, presently enjoying the prestigious status of Chief of Operations tactical branch Sea Dogs, reporting directly to the admiralty of the Department of the Navy, New Republic.

Where the newly formed New Republic was still in the process of rebuilding, much of the government budget was spend in support of it during which time terrorist aggression did not stop for the rest of the world. To prevent repeated success of stated aggression from radical Islam, as experienced under the former United States regime, new government elects such as President Norton, Commanding General Foster, supported by reactivated Intel organizations, contractors, and support functions, a decision had to be made within the limited budget with regard to national defense. Stretched as it already was, alternatives had to be sought. One such alternative consideration was reactivating Brooks and his squadron of Sea Dogs. It was this decision that paid his means of operation currently conducted at the Baltimore harbor.

Just finishing his usual morning ritual, he stepped out from his condo entrance onto the sidewalk, overlooking the bustling Baltimore harbor, a place he treasured very much. His gaze shifted to the skies to get a feel for today's weather conditions. Aside from a few clouds drifting overhead, all was clear. He planned to enjoy another day of leisure and pleasures of the day. Things sure have changed, he thought amid quick bursts of foghorns released from tugboats, alerting shipping traffic in and out of the harbor. It was not so long ago when the nation—his nation—came under attack, with onslaught after onslaught by radical terrorists trying to take over. Who would have thought that a foreign country would dare such an exploit, he

contemplated as he waited for the traffic light to change.

With thoughts like this, he headed directly for the piers. On his days off in between assignments, called upon by one or another naval fleet command, he usually made it a habit to hang out by the harbor. Aside from being his favorite spot on earth, he had a purpose for being here. It gave him direct access to check on passengers getting off the cargo ships frequenting the Baltimore harbor. Taking a seat on one of the mooring posts, he was able to watch the many faces coming off shipping liners arriving from far away places such as China, India, Russia, and the Middle East. It was sailors from there, the Middle East, in which he was mostly interested. It was there where most of the trouble of terrorists infiltrating the country had started. Changes in local immigration policies had yet to be enforced on all water fronts. It was shipping commerce that provided best opportunities for unauthorized personnel to slip across borders. In contrast to airports, sea vessels offered many hiding places for a voyager, legal as well as illegal.

What Brooks was primarily looking out for were tanned, bearded, loosely fitted garbed sailors striding down gangplanks anxious to set foot on American soil. He was profiling. Though illegal within the country, its practices went on with like troubled nations elsewhere. There seemed to be certain outstanding features associated with race, culture, and customs. They were mostly strangers but Brooks was always on guard. It would not be the first time he had spotted a familiar face he once fought off during one of his many battles with the terrorists.

Suddenly, something caught his attention. I know those faces, went thought his mind. It made him bound from the mooring post he was presently resting on. With his face partially masked by a pair of prominent sunshades, Brooks quickened his pace to catch up. He followed from a distance, sufficiently shadowed from the sailors so as not to be overly noticeable but near enough to overhear their conversation. With nervous eyes darting around the place, searching the docks, one said, "When's our contact?" His companion muttered, "Evening. After dark." It was enough for Brooks to figure out a strategy.

Like most establishments built along a harbor front, it was dimly lit, casual in setting, with signs plastered along the walls promoting the sailor's favorite product, beer. This one was no exception. The establishment was reasonably quiet this time of day, as business normally did not pick up until evening hours. "Beer," he said to the obliging bartender. "Make it a Light." Brooks

was not prone to drinking alcohol. Not that he shied from a drink here and there, especially when protocol or situation required it, but here and now his position was to keep a clear head. It was the “Way of the Warrior,” his fighting code. He had stuck by it for most of his life. It had kept him alert and alive on many occasions.

He did not have to hang around. Taking a mental snapshot of the two faces he decided to return by evening. He paid for his drink, exited and headed back to his condo wondering what the sailors had in planned and how the evening would turn out.

CASTLE ROCK

“Well?” With her eyes fixated on Alex’s face, Tracy waited patiently for a response from her dad. He must have sensed her query, suspended in the air. Alex finally opened his eyes. He noticed her halting posture then concentrated on the issues at hand. “Ah yes.” He returned to their earlier topic. “The talk. The future. Your future.”

“I need help. I need your advice. I don’t know what to do next.” After being mentally exhausted and spent of energy, she felt she needed a break. The first few weeks were blissful but as time went by, week after week, she became restless once more. At first, she could not quite make out the reason for her restlessness. After all, with relative peace returned to her country she should be euphoric.

People around her had taken notice, especially Alex, but he remained tightlipped. He knew she needed her space and privacy, not only to recover from the loss of precious friends, but, more importantly, to find her sense of direction for the future. He also knew how important it was for her to regain her focus to eventually find a place in rebuilding the nation. “Let’s take a look at your mindset first,” he suggested. “Share your thoughts with me.”

Gazing around her immediate space, she said, “Dad, you must know I love you, the family, the sanctity of the Castle, the security you provide, but I need more. You know that.” She paused.

“I am well aware. Go on.”

“I’m disgusted with myself. Every time I come back from an assignment, I can’t wait to get back to the forefront of fighting. I can’t wait for the next call to come from Foster or some foreign office for yet another assignment. Have I turned evil? What do you think?”

“Evil is a strong label. You are not evil,” he pacified her. “Sure, you’ve changed. But think of all the lives you helped save, and continue to save. The country needs you. People depend on you.” Alex had never thought he would actually encourage his daughter to fight. He was no different than most parents. He wanted only the best for her. A life lived in harmony with a happy marriage, healthy children, a successful career, and a prosperous future. He used to be so protective of her. But situations change. And they had. The entire populace had been affected by war, poverty, and disease, as well as the collapse of the economy. Everybody struggled to survive. Where most had now picked up their previous lives, jobs, and careers, for Tracy it was a different case. There was no position for her skills, those of a fighter, in

an industrious, peaceful, recovering economy. “What is it that you really want?”

“I don’t know.” Alex sensed she was getting more frustrated. He did not want to push any further. He waited. “Remember,” she said, finally opening up her mind. “We used to have so much fun together with sparring, working out, and philosophizing on historical events?” Tracy vividly remembered those days when they used to practice martial arts together with him teaching fighting skills, her absorbing every movement and nuance and, in the process, getting hurt. She didn’t care. All she wanted was the confidence he projected. He was her idol. He was her protector. He was her dad. “I dearly miss those days.”

“I don’t blame you,” he admitted. “I miss them too. But things have changed. You have changed. You cannot return to the past. We have to move forward.” He shrugged his shoulders and continued, suggesting, “Take your time. Look around. Enjoy your break. Savor the beauty of the Rockies while you are here. Adjust to your environment. I did.” He was waiting for a response but her mind seemed turned inward. “Tell you what,” he said, “meet me in the gym. It will take your mind off your problems. It will bring you down to earth—just you and me. Like the old times.” He promptly got up and headed for the dojo below. Realizing he was gone, she quickly followed.

“Take this,” he egged her on after throwing another punch. “And this?” Alex paused, wiped his face clean with a sleeve and through slightly squinted eyes followed her every move on another advance. They were quick, focused, precise, and damaging. “Ouch,” he grunted. One of her kicks slipped by his defense and landed on his ribcage.

“Wanna Quit?” Tracy could feel her dad’s energy wearing down. They were already thirty minutes into the martial arts session when Alex signaled for a timeout. Slightly winded and bruised, he said, “I need a break. Where’d you get that energy?” Despite Alex needing the break to catch his breath, she was hardly showing signs of weakening. As usually after a round of sparring they sat on the floor in lotus position discussing either martial arts philosophy or issues at hand. Today their focus was on Tracy and her future.

It was Alex breaking the silence, “What’s with the attitude?”

“What attitude?” She turned facing him for an explanation.

Alex had been closely watching her face during their bout and clearly noticed the change in her. What used to be a face filled with combat

challenge and defiance, now, it seemed hardened eyes staring at him. He could not help but voice his concerns. “The anger, the hostility, the fury.”

“Pent-up frustrations,” was her abrupt reply.

“Mind still on the Prophet?”

“Always. I wish I’d get a second chance.”

“You sure he’s gone?”

“Saw him drown. Remember? You had us on monitors.” It had been the ultimate fight between two capable, opposing warriors. It was the outcome of Stinger being the victor that allowed the rebuilding of her country. Jihad forces had gone into retreat, waiting for new opportunities.

“There’re still survivors,” he pacified her. “Yusuf and jihadists spread around the globe. They’ll surface again.”

“Not without effective leadership.”

“Don’t worry. You’ll get your chance. But,” he cautioned her, “there are other, more pressing dangers facing us.”

“Such as?”

“We’re facing another solar cycle. It’s going to be a big one.”

“How do you know?” Tracy did not seem overly worried. Sun cycles came and went. They had been around for millions of years. “We’re still here, aren’t we?”

“Yeah,” he agreed. “But species have been wiped out a number of times. The prediction has just been released.”

“NASA?”

“Right. Cycle 24. Group of researchers’ prediction. Looks like it’s going to be the most intense cycles since record keeping began 400 years ago.”

“What’s your take on all of it?” Tracy had always put a lot of value on her dad’s decisions with all of the monitoring, analysis, and test equipment at his disposal. To her, he was the unbiased eyes and ears probing space. So far, he had never been wrong.

“I have to agree with them on this,” he admitted. “Sensor’s observing similar statistics. They spell trouble.”

“Any timeframe?”

“Don’t know exactly. But sure enough in the next couple of months.”

“Well then. You up for another round.” She was not worried.

“I’m ready.”

“You lead.” They went into another bout of thirty minutes working out. The result was with him receiving more punishment. Tracy revitalized in the

process, honing her fighting skills. Alex kept up his health and body strength.

Spent but content, after taking a soothing shower Alex headed for the Command center below, where more troublesome printouts were waiting for him, while Tracy went about her business. Other than their concerns on sunspot cycles, her personal issues with “The Talk,” still needed to be resolved, but both also realized how important it was to keep up personal communications, if only for the benefit of body and mind. Where Alex suspected his daughter’s concerns, he did his best to delay the inevitable, that of her moving on.

PENTAGON

General Foster was reading through the flood of daily emails awaiting him each morning. Being an early riser, he beat not only rush hour traffic, but also early morning commuters to the Pentagon. He knew quite well how busy the Beltway and its feeder roads could be when it was time for the office worker to be at work. This morning was no exception. Being a Monday, the beginning of a workweek, his reading load was light after a relatively peaceful weekend. He knew the situation would change closer to midweek. Depending on the schedules and activities for the week, much of the unclassified traffic was forwarded to the department managers who patiently sifted through folders and files of information waiting for a response or requiring immediate action. Most were rudimentary reports forwarded from various offices reporting to him. It was a different case with classified materials. Depending on priority and urgency, held in specific categorized computer directories, these were directed to Foster for personal and prompt attention.

One such report marked “Secret Ops immediate,” with the originator identified in the subject field as NASA, caught his attention. Traffic from that office usually carried mostly routine/unclassified distribution. Since he was on top of the agency’s space activities, with nothing scheduled for launch that he presently knew of, he clicked on the attached link. The accompanied text immediately popped up on the screen. It was a warning indicating:

“HIGH ALERT!

M-3 class solar flare detected.

Source GOES-13¹.

Peak flux 750 picos.

ETA 36 hours +/- 3 hours.”

Foster, with astronomy being one of his minor studies in college, immediately knew it spelled trouble. Solar flares, as prolific as they were at times of active cycle, had the potential for causing great damages to man’s technology and earth’s prosperity, depending on severity. Thirty-six hours might seem to be a long time to make preparations, but in human response action and moment, there was never enough time to fully prepare for any type of onslaught initiated by the sun. He was about to pick up the phone and switch to secure to alert the Secretary of Defense when the ringer turned active. Checking the caller ID he recognized the originator. “Bauer?”

“Just got a series of alerts from GOES-East,” Alex reported. “Looks...”

“I know,” Foster cut in. “I’m looking at it as we speak.”

“Looks like a major one. What do you think?”

“Got to agree on this one,” Foster said.

“What’s the plan?” Alex asked. With national alert situations of major threats he usually let the general drive the decision. All he could offer was technology readiness and status support. Since the Pentagon was back in business, most of the space assets linked to Alex, with the help from his deceased buddy Brian, appropriated legally, or in some instances illegally, had to be turned over to the defense department. After that, Alex had lost most direct access to military, defense, and commercial satellites. What he did not volunteer to Foster was that he was withholding connectivity to the most critical components, the birds in orbit. For all practical purposes, Alex kept uplink and downlink satellite connections alive with the Castle. He wondered sometimes if Foster suspected it but neither of them ever approached this highly sensitive topic. He assumed the general respected their longtime friendship and Alex’s dedication to the nation’s safety.

“All we can do is wait and see. Right?”

“Not much else to do at this time,” Alex agreed.

“Gonna be years before we have a budget to rebuild infrastructures, power and communication. By the way,” Foster offered, “why don’t you come down and visit? We can discuss where you might fit in.”

“Sounds good. I’ve got my own plans I want to pass by you. Give me a week.”

“You won’t regret it. See you then.” It was settled.

Alex knew Foster had plans other than just discussing budgets and upcoming projects. Periodically, he pumped Alex for information and status. After years of working together and sharing actions in recent years, it seemed that the general had become dependent on Alex’s savvy for technology ingenuity, judgment, and ideas. For now, Alex spent the next few days monitoring the ether solar flare of possible CME² magnitude on its way to hit Earth’s surface. The precise impact zone was only available to the folks at NASA, who refused to reveal this information to the public for the reason that it might cause unnecessary panic, as was the case with many solar flares with visual results, usually observed in regions close to the Arctic Circle through the spectacular dance displays from the aurora.

What Alex had in mind to discuss with Foster was his plan to guard

against any major CME guaranteed to happen sooner or later resulting in possible major catastrophe, if infrastructures were not protected. With years of engineering experience in design and development against potential EMP strikes on the nation's defense perimeters, Alex felt he knew exactly what needed to be done. He had done it once before, but that was against a nuclear strike from their former adversary, the USSR. An immediate hit initiated by the sun would be a much greater challenge. At times, it carried so much destructive energy that nothing at man's disposal would be effective protection. Such a strike could cause anything from a regional power outage to the complete collapse of the nation's power grid, communication, and industry—nothing less than an economic Armageddon.

SILENT PERILS

“NEWS FLASH...,” the teleprompter alerted the morning newscasters reporting on today’s news events as they occurred, locally or around the globe. It seemed that lately, all news was bad and getting worse. Where in past decades the news was more diverse, other than just political conflicts, cultural unrests, and border clashes, today, news had to be spicy for the watchers to even pay attention. It was nonstop disasters, tragedies, and catastrophes, whether accidental or environmental related. Today was no different, “Chinese military budget has been increased proportionally with their recent economic growth,” is said. “In addition to the Chinese naval forces’ currently commissioned and operational carrier fleet, the admiralty expected to have four more carrier fleets in operation by the year 2020.” Where the news may have been an item subconsciously absorbed by the common citizens, it hit like a bombshell to the New Republic policy makers. “Here we go again,” General Foster, attending the morning’s presidential brief with grimace cut across his face, voicing his concerns across the table at the Chief of National Intelligence, demanding an answer. “So much for peace. What do you have to say?”

The head of Intel hesitated before answering, “We’ve had some indications that the Chinese were up to something.” It became obvious to Foster that it was the only admittance forthcoming. He pressed further, “Why haven’t I been informed?” Foster, only recently elevated in rank from Commander Armed Forces to Joint Chiefs of Staff member, his suspicions had come true. Command priorities still rested with the naval admiralty. He was determined to change that when he demanded, “I want full report. Have it on my desk by morning.”

In contrast to individual wishful ways of thinking with a life lived in relative comfort hoping for an everlasting period, adverse conditions have been placed on society since the beginning of modern man. Mankind living in a fast paced, economically driven modern day society generally lived and acted in the reactive mode. There seemed to be no reserved budget set aside for future threats and potentially unexpected emergency contingencies. “We’ll deal with it when the time comes,” was the general sentiment when the topic came up. Where good intentions were prevalent by policy makers, allocating time, effort, and funding was yet another matter.

Advancements in technology, evolution, and prosperity were in every

individual's stride, and to a more primitive level that of beings in the animal world and plant kingdom with a specific purpose in life. It inspired imagination, ingenuity, and creativity, all necessary components for the survival of the species.

Progress and prosperity, the ingredient for environmental conditions we desire or create, provided us with the springboard of an advancing technology platform developed for an ever expanding sphere in demand and social form for the user and consumer. Ever since the creation of the wheel, whether it was a good thing or not, progress was here to stay. It had become part of our essential being. Our very existence was linked to it. It was part of a natural evolution to where we don't give it a minute's thought.

Being relative terms, they could mean wealth and riches for the fortunate, success for the prosperous, or sustainability for the average hard-working human being. Whether inherited, shaped, or created, most of us strive for an improvement in lifestyle and living conditions linked to our present environment or individual aspiration. We all long for it. It is the most important incentive for the individual to elevate oneself into the next desired level of comfort.

It was here where we earned the rewards of our endurance of laboring. It was the platform we strove for. It provided limitless opportunities for choosing a selective future based on individual strive, ability, and capability. Where it was a dream for many, it was the desire for others. At the end, we all desired a life led in comfort, style, and affluence. But all was not as clean cut. The environment had limitations. It was limited, for the most part, by external influences. External could mean disaster brought on by nature. It could mean unforeseen interference through unexpected calamity. Or it could be forced upon us through manmade instigation. If one believed in faith, it could yet be another circumstance chosen by destiny.

Many generations have come and gone since the creation of mankind. Some were spent in rather quiet times where others were endured in turmoil. Turmoil seemed to be specially directed at man. As historical accounts attest, there had hardly been a peaceful coexistence between nations for very long. Most likely, during the course of one lifetime, each generation has seen or experienced a multitude of conflicts. Conflicts seem to be the norm for the life of man. It did not take much of an effect to trigger a conflict. It began with the immediate environment. Just think of the conditions you experienced living at close quarters within an apartment or crowded neighborhood, at

times exceedingly crammed with family, friends, and strangers. Excessive noise, outlandish sounds, disturbances of the quiet were generated as a result of close proximity, in many instances infringing on one's stressed senses, in recent times more often than not ending with damaging or deadly results.

People seemed to have less patience in the wake of progress and prosperity. Progress could have many consequences ranging from technological intrusion on privacy to the ever-growing increase in population proliferated mostly through poverty, oppression, and unhealthy living conditions. In general, it was progress that pressed increasingly onto our nerves, creating tension and unnecessary strain to our wellbeing. Regardless of adverse conditions, we were forced to become tolerant with much of it. In an attempt to fit into the crowded society of today and more so in the future, especially in urban living, we were forced to become patient. There was a breaking point, nevertheless. It was this terminal condition that was the determinant factor to individual tolerance and endurance.

Much of conflicts came on gradually but were exasperated over time involving two individuals at best, but due to economic living conditions more likely involve family and nearby groups of neighbors. There was hardly a stretch of time that has not been affected in this manner. It was part of being human. The range of intolerance was broad in scale. With some it was short fused; with others, they were more tolerant. There were, however, not many individuals callused enough to be unaffected from disturbances by others or blessed with a carefree attitude, tolerating any imposed infringement large and small from rapidly expanding environmental conditions.

Aside from being mostly annoyance pressing on the individual's senses, there were conditions carrying much greater consequences. They could carry conditions that had potentially lethal and wide ranging penalties, not only to the individual, but more importantly, to the environment as a whole. Rather than cause personal disputes, the combination of both individual and environmental factors usually resulted in much higher impacts, in some cases leading to catastrophic proportions.

"Sir," the office manager announced handing Foster the folder as he stepped into his Pentagon office, "Intel brief."

"Proves the point," he muttered, stepping up to his desk.

"What point?" the manager questioned.

"The point that, 'the squeaky wheel gets the grease.'"

PALM JUMEIRAH

At the Leader's spacious, mosque like abode fronting the shorelines, Hasan Hammad, also known as the Prophet, spoke in a soft voice to Yusuf, his experienced and trusted warrior and confidant. His demeanor was not that of the usual impatient, gruff, and commanding tone he normally projected. It may have been the setting, once again lounging aloft amid the posh decoration of the supreme leader domicile for Jihad and Al Qaeda. Located at the shores of the predominant Palm Jumeirah, a manmade island situated along the sandy shores of the Straits of Hormuz, both warriors were still convalescing after having faced death on not only one but several occasions. With Yusuf, it was from his last encounter with Stinger, where he was almost killed in downtown Manhattan. With Hammad, it was a final face off only a mile offshore from where they were seated. He clearly recalled the last encounter with Stinger, where he'd been ready to deal her a deathblow when the unexpected happened. Her reaction, he contributed it to youth, was quicker than the blink of an eye. While he was prominently staged to deliver the final throw, it was he that took the stab into his chest from the lethal mast of her windsurfer rig. He still could not fathom how she had survived the onslaught of the cyclone by cutting right through its center, only to suddenly emerge from what must have been an inferno.

"What are your thoughts?" Yusuf Hashim, commander and trusted aid to Jihad's supreme commander and leader, Hasan Hammad, asked.

"I must thank you once again for saving my life," Hammad said. In hindsight, all he could think of was divine intervention from her god, the infidel's God. "Allah," he grumbled into the heavens above. "You have forsaken me and my cause."

It immediately brought on anger to Yusuf. "Please," he rebuked Hammad for taking the name of the savior in vain. "What has happened to you? I do not know you anymore. I only see a detested infidel when I look at you. Please tell me it is not so."

"No such thing," Hammad protested. "I will never lose my faith in Islam. I will always be devout to Mohamed and Allah. It's just," he explained, "that Allah must be asleep. You must agree," he shifted his gaze to his trusted friend, nodding at the heavens. "He has not been very attentive to my prayers and needs. Or yours, for that matter. We both have suffered and been defeated not only once, but over and over again."

"The world, its people," Yusuf said in a sympathetic tone of voice, "are

directed against us. Against Islam. The forces are too overwhelming. I must agree.”

“So you do see it my way,” Hammad said.

“I do not read your mind. I can only judge you by your words.”

“Let’s not quarrel. There are more important things we must discuss. We need to focus on the future. I had to make concessions to the plan, My Plan. It became obvious that past strategies did not work. We must do better in order to achieve our goals.” Since his former initiatives in gaining hold of the free world had failed, he had to come up with a complete new strategy. Mostly bedridden, convalescing already for several months, Hammad had had ample time to come up with a new approach for his future conquest. He had not given up achieving his desperately desired goals of world dominance by Islam. “We must achieve an end to all the oppression by the Western world.”

“I agree,” Yusuf said, releasing an audible sigh of relief. “I thought I’d lost you and your principles on our beliefs. I was wrong. What do you have in mind for the future?”

“Let me tell you.” Hammad knew from their former talks, especially during recent times, that he had to consider his trusted commander’s sensitivity to the cause of Islam. Being childhood friends, he would never think of spoiling their trusted relationship. They had grown interdependent in a time where there was so much uncertainty and distrust in the world. “It seems most nations,” he explained, “the important ones, have been squabbling openly with each other rather than uniting. The whole world is rapidly changing.”

“So I’ve noticed.”

“Please hear me out. What I have to say is of the utmost importance. As I’ve already stated, the whole world is in uproar. We must take advantage of it.”

“I agree wholeheartedly.”

Hammad shot him a quick glance, indicating his annoyance with the interruptions. “I have a plan,” he continued. “But it will take some time to organize. We do not have the resources, skills, and expertise I am talking about, for forging ahead.”

“What expertise is needed?”

“First,” he said, “we must make political and logistical connections. Then, we infiltrate into what is deemed the world’s most technologically triumphed scientific sphere. After which we must organize our tactical forces with new

members to make up the severe losses we've had."

"What triumph are you talking about?" Yusuf, during many of the recent battles fought on American soil, had been incapacitated and unable to participate in Hammad's quest for Islam. He lacked much of the information on political and technological shifts in the Western world, especially in E.U. nations. As for the New Republic, the country would still need time to rebuild and revive its economical status before it would be a threat again.

"I have to admit," Hammad said, facing his friend in dismay, acknowledging his multiple defeats for taking on the Western world. "It may have been a mistake taking on the American giant. I may have bitten off too big a piece. But I am an ambitious individual. A warrior destined to succeed."

"I wholeheartedly agree with you. There is no one better suited for your quest."

"Hear me out," he said, demanding full attention from his field commander. "I have had a revelation that confirmed our past failures. It is a vision of monumental proportions. It will gain us complete control and dominance over the Western world."

"Please," Yusuf beckoned, "Tell me." He could not contain his enthusiasm any longer and was chastised once again.

"Patience my friend," he said, placating Yusuf. "In due time, I will share my strategy. For now, we must concentrate on your mission."

"What mission?"

"We will discuss tomorrow. For now," he offered, "let's enjoy the serenity of this place." Yusuf realized there was no use in pressing further. Aside from still recovering from recent injuries, it would take time to reorganize his forces.

"I shall make one last point, an important one," Hammad implied, adjourning their meeting with an astute hint of wisdom in the eyes. "It may take some time for us to reorganize world powers and global dominance but I promise you," he paused to let the enormity sink in, "we will achieve supremacy in governing the financial world, consolidating religions, and manage globalization in accordance with Mohammed's principles."

"Allahu Akbar," Yusuf cheered, thrusting his clasped hands heavenward, thankful to his leader for sharing his innermost secrets with him.

NEW BEGINNING

Another day, another NEWS FLASH...“Early this morning,” the announcer reported. “An explosion occurred at Union Station at the height of commuter travel. Dozens of deaths and many more injured have been reported by first responders. Police have cordoned off the station for security reasons. At this time,” the report went on, “no faction has made claim for the bombing but terrorist suspects cannot be ruled out.” Further news was reported at all mainstream media networks as they occurred. “I hope somebody is going to do something about it,” Tracy remarked, seated at the breakfast table, face changing from complacent to fury, “and soon.”

“If the government won’t,” Alex agreed. “I’m sure you will.”

“Damned right I will.” Watching another terrorist attack on the nation, her nation, as it usually did brought her blood to a boil. It had been only recently when she returned from her own personal battles with Jihad.

“You won’t have to wait much longer for Foster to reach out to you.” It seemed that attacks occurred much more frequent in recent weeks. It was a sure indicator that terrorist factions were on the move against the New Republic. His assumption proved to be true in no time at all. “You prepared to fight?”

“You know I am. It’s what I live for. I just thought I’d have some time to enjoy being home.”

“Me too. Miss having you around.”

“Whished I knew what exactly Jihad is fighting for?”

“Same we were two hundred fifty years ago, land, freedom, liberty. But there is one element the free world will not accept,” Alex insisted, “their laws and legal practices.”

“Sharia?”

“The one. Let’s take a closer look at the cause of Islam.” Like most times, while Alex talked, Tracy listened attentively. She had so much to learn of his knowledge.

“Living in the United States of America, was a dream come true for many people, especially the ones immigrated from somewhere else. Natively born may not realize the great fortune of being born into the world’s leading nation. It was an advanced nation, not only technologically but economically and socially, setting trends and influencing others through public demands. How did we get there?”

“The journey, an adventurous one, began with the first settlers arriving on

the shores of the Eastern Seaboard. It was a journey laden with tremendous burdens carried by each and every immigrant departing Europe with prayers for a safe journey. Not all made it without incident. The lucky ones arriving in the new land, as soon as stepping on solid ground, instantly shed their burdens and breathed freely, perhaps for the first time in their lives. It would be a new beginning for all. Regardless of one's past status, rank, position, rich or poor, setting foot on American soil was a new beginning.

“The load dropped from each burdened shoulder was a heavy one. They ranged from escaping poverty, social injustice, or economic demise in general: oppression from many causes. There were many reasons one paid for passage to the new land but the primary one was escaping from religious persecutions exacerbated even further by the absence of freedom and liberty. The weight, however, was not as readily shed as expected. It was replaced with new burdens, challenges, and confrontations coming from many directions. Where some were plagued by diseases during the first years, others suffered from starvation and many more from native resistance and attacks by wild beasts. But these were threats that could be overcome much easier by the pioneer-spirited minded than the burdens left in their wake, with mostly one thing on the minds of the newly arrived—freedom from all.

“Freedom is what we all strove for on and above what life's virtues had to offer, but it was the longing for freedom that has gotten mankind into trouble many times before. It was this freedom, once tasted that will be our cross to bear. It did not end there. With the tremendous population growth around the globe in recent decades, we were rapidly running out of real estate. What used to be free and unoccupied spaces, now were rapidly dwindling. Sure, there were still unpopular and sparsely populated regions prevailing across some states, especially the wastelands of Nevada, the Sierras, states along our northern neighbor Canada, and the mountainous ridges of the Rockies. But there was a reason these regions were sparsely settled. They were places remotely situated and not mainstream within an industrial belt. For most of us, we sought out industries that provided an ability for creating a living, comfortably or inept, along with the freedom of being. This freedom, however, assured by the constitution, also came with a burden we all had to share, that of supporting government and politics, which in recent years has placed an ever-growing demand on us.

“Regardless of the kind of government we choose, whether monarchist, dynastic, communist, socialist, fascist, or democracy, all have been tried. And

all have failed. It did not matter much what type of governing the early settlers inherited and carried into the new world, whether passed on from the Patriarchs of Biblical times or elected by the people, shed burdens were quickly replaced by newly acquired challenges. But challenges came in many different shapes. Initially, it was the elements the settlers had to overcome. The first winter caused starvation exasperated even more by uncertainties in the next year. As luck had it, the seeds carried along took root, gradually at first, then with an accelerated rate. Harvests were plentiful thereafter. On hand were unlimited materials and supplies for creating shelter and dwellings for all. Space was open to roam and to claim stake to for each family and pioneer. Once the initial struggle was overcome, settlers, however, were facing new challenges. Some came in the form of sickness and disease, others through clashes with natives and coniferous animals, but all in all, despite the dangers and hardship placed on each, it was a beginning promising untold opportunities for wealth and fortune.

“It was an opportunity provided for the rich and the poor, the fortunate and unfortunate alike, unequalled to none. It was here where the new life for the settlers began. With riches waiting above and below ground, settlers spread out in every direction, claiming their personal stake. Such was the life of the settler. Some failed in their endeavors, others became wealthy and successful. And a new nation was created, that of America.”

“So,” Tracy, in heightened expectations asked. “Where does that leave us?”

“We have to protect at all cost for what each of us live for and have achieved.”

“No argument here.”

VANDENBERG AFB

As was the case for creating a new beginning for the early settlers and the generations that followed, so too was the new beginning for Lisa Bauer of more recent times. Liz, having survived a near death experience onboard the International Space Station, had been given a new lease on life. Jihad terrorists had taken over the spacecraft, now obliterated and floating in many pieces through space as space junk some 250 miles in orbit, and Liz had been rescued barely alive. In charge of the recently revived space exploration program the New Republic had initiated, to be close to her work, Liz has moved to San Luis Obispo. Her kids, of school age, remained in Napa Valley for the time being in the care of their grandma. For now, things seem to be working out in everybody's favor. Still plagued by nightmares from the series of traumatic events aboard the space station, the experience would have a lasting effect on her. For now, her time was occupied mostly with the planning and preparations for an upcoming satellite launch.

"Liz." The office manager's voice called to her attention over the intercom. "Office please." Liz terminated her current task and headed for his office. "What's up?"

"Take a look," he said, handing her a brief. "What do you make of it?" Liz briefly studied the printed sheet and quickly identified the data source. It was an automated report generated by GOES-15, relayed via repeater hubs and propagated to all organizations and agencies deemed important. It gave the current, just received data statistics on what seemed to be an increase in sunspot activities. The figures were clear. Solar activity in recent months had been on the increase, in both magnitude and frequency. Liz had no immediate answer but promised to keep him informed. Gotta check with Dad, were her immediate thoughts. She suspected, rather, she knew he would have the same statistics in his hands already. With all of the sensory equipment at his disposal, there was not much that escaped his eyes. She placed the call.

"Bauer," the familiar sounding voice answered after three rings.

"Hi, Dad. How're things at the Castle?"

"Liz," he joyfully responded when he recognized her voice. "Can't complain," he stated. "When are you coming to visit?"

"Dad," she said, momentarily ignoring his question. After her rescue from space, he had insisted that she take an extended holiday from her hectic, hazardous, and challenging career, but after spending a couple of weeks at the Castle with her kids, she had returned to California with her kids, them

headed to their respective schools and her to take an awaiting assignment at Vandenberg AFB, where new responsibilities awaited her. “Did you see the latest figures on solar flares? What gives?”

“Normally,” he informed her, “I would ignore it as just another cycle. But since you asked, this may be something different.”

“What do you mean?”

“I don’t know exactly where it all comes from, the energy, the particles, and the mass. I haven’t seen anything like it dating back as long as we’ve been tracking. Can’t tell you exactly where it will end up and lead to.”

“It’s that serious?”

“I hope not but,” he replied, “I’m staying on top of it. I’ll keep you informed. If it gets too much, you’re always welcome to stay here. Bring the kids. They’ll love the mountains and forests. You did.”

“Thank you, Dad. I’ll keep it in mind, and keep me informed. It’s important for the next mission.”

“Got a schedule yet?”

“Not finalized.”

“Okay. Bye now.”

“Bye, Dad. Give my regards to Rhonda and Sis.” She hung up.

“Wonder what mission she’s working,” he pondered. NASA, keeping abreast in space exploration, had just recently elevated its level of security to top secret with newly appropriated funding. “God knows what they’re up to.” If it wasn’t one secret, it was another. He knew quite well the structure and purpose of the government. His entire career hinged on it. He had no complaints but recognized the trends of a repeating cycle. “Much like sunspots,” he concluded and headed back to his domain of computers, electronics, and sensors.

THE PENTAGON

General Foster, in the olden days trapped mostly behind a mahogany desk centered within a spacious office, these days was mostly on the go. What kept him and others occupying space at the Pentagon, currently still under renovation, were endless meetings. Since his recent return from the Western Sector on the Pacific coast, which had held the temporary defense headquarters of government and presidential seats after the collapse of the country, the main objective was to create a strong defense posture once more. "This time," he vowed to the delegates present, "we will do it right." It was not that the founders of the original constitution had it wrong; what he referred to were the conditions that allowed the former United States of America to fail. Where elected officials prospered and became wealthier by the year, the public, the workforce, the taxpayer, and the middle class were systematically eradicated. The idea may have been planted by overzealous organizers and governmental and political functionaries, but most likely, it was from the economic conditions prevalent for the time. In an attempt to squeeze more and more profits from a thriving economy, ambitious industrialists, sustained by political supporters, greatly benefited from the ensuing windfall, that of outsourcing. And thus, America's corporate leadership took over.

"Outsourcing" became the industrial slogan for its time. It was outsourcing to underdeveloped nations that caused the great demise that befell the nation. It was outsourcing that eliminated a once thriving economy. It was outsourcing that caused severe unemployment and the eventual collapse. It did not come on suddenly. It developed gradually. Most did not see the changing trends, especially not the gainfully employed. But statisticians, social engineers, and scientists saw the trends. Their warnings went unheard until it was too late. The end result was a leading edge, technologically-advanced nation collapsing into a third world country.

"Sir," the office manager interrupted Foster, presently hosting another strategy meeting, "You have visitors."

"Take them to my office," he replied. "I'll be there in a minute." Minutes later he adjourned the assembly and headed for his office. "Well, well," he cheered, greeting his longtime friend Alex and former employee, accompanied by his confidant Tracy. "Glad you could make it." He welcomed his buddy with a smile but headed directly for Tracy, giving her a heartfelt hug. It became obvious to Alex that Foster harbored a caring love

for Tracy. After all, they had gone through much misery and hardship together over the past years.

“Not easy to get a seat these days,” Alex said, sporting a broad grin, “without flightworthy commercial flights.” Airports, air fleets, and ground infrastructures were still rebuilt and under construction. Many airports still showed remnants of war and destruction, with heaps of crashed or demolished crafts spread across tarmacs and fields. The only craft in operation were WWII type planes, salvaged from the historic, but still flourishing, Confederate Air Force. Everything else more modern had been taken out by the EMP strike from the year before.

“Come,” he gestured, “Have a seat.” The office secretary was already busy serving snacks. Refreshments and accompanied condiments served to welcome visitors in a political office were a newly-acquired status symbol, indicative of prosperity by a land just emerging from extreme poverty. Rhonda, who had taken up a job at the Pentagon, showed up at the doorframe a minute later, happily smiling at the unexpected visitors.

She gave Alex a cheerful hug and planted a kiss on his cheek. “Glad you’re here. We’ll catch up later.” Alex agreed.

“So,” Foster said, willfully acknowledging his guests. “Let’s see what troubles we can get in. By the way,” he directed his gaze at Tracy, “what have you been up to lately? Ready to join my team?”

It was obvious that he missed having her around. Where at one time she was his operational assistant working as NSA liaison at the Pentagon, more recently she had earned the rank of full-bird colonel, bestowed by Foster. It was a rank she still held and operated with during her missions. But with the recently acquired economic revival and cutbacks in military strength, Tracy was uncertain about her future and where she might fit in. The role she held as heralded Stinger, the killer woman, for the time being seemed to be suspended, and with it the very reason for her existence.

“Depends on what you’ve got in mind.”

“Well.” Foster hesitated. “Let’s talk about it.” His gaze shifted to Alex, waiting for a response while he was formulating the topic, the reason they were here together.

“Hank,” Alex said, addressing Foster directly. “There’s been something on my mind. It’s something rather important. Something we need to work out. It may be a need for survival.”

“Survival?” Foster shot him a quizzical look, waiting for an explanation.

“Mankind.” Alex sought out Tracy’s face for her concurrence. She answered by nodding at him. “Our very existence.” They had talked about this very concern on many occasions. Out of courtesy for the general, Rhonda sat by quietly.

“Go on,” Foster encouraged him.

“Something’s come up I think you should know.”

“Do tell.”

Alex, for once, had the general’s full attention. “You know my capacity to monitor space, defense lines, and the skies above.”

“I’m well aware. I paid for most of the stuff.”

“I just wanted to make sure you’re on my side. I don’t want any legal repercussions from you or the government.”

“Got my word,” Foster said with a quick nod at Tracy. His assurance also applied to Tracy while on missions.

“As I see it,” Alex began, “threats related to EMP could be initiated by lightning strikes, solar flares, cosmic events, nuclear devices, superpower threats, and terrorist attacks.”

“Yeah, but...” Foster cut in.

“Please let me finish,” Alex objected, then continued. “To be realistic, let me give you my priorities. Lightning strikes,” Alex stressed, “we know happen at any time around the globe. Most, if not all, dissipate without causing major damage. Cosmic events are rare and occur once in millions of years. We don’t have to worry about them. Superpowers, once considered the only threat to our infrastructure and wellbeing, were all but eradicated with SALT and MAD. That leaves us with only two major concerns.”

“Solar flares and terrorist attacks,” Foster replied. Tracy knew where Alex was going. She had heard it all in recent months. It was a topic of concern to both. Rhonda, also familiar with EMP, kept quiet but paid close attention. There was never idle chat with Alex. She and most people she knew paid attention when he talked. It had saved her life on numerous occasions. She fully respected his knowledge, awareness, and intuitiveness.

“We all know,” Alex went on, “the threats and damages caused by terrorist attacks over the past decades. All of us went through the terror, misery, and hardship because of it.”

“I think,” Tracy proposed, “with world awareness of terrorist capabilities, for the moment that seems under control, or at least suppressed from flaring up any time soon.”

“I should hope so,” Alex agreed.

“Let’s talk about solar flares,” Foster suggested. “It’s been in the news all over the wires.”

Alex felt it was his task to educate them on threat-related specifics. “Let me fill you in.”

“We know what solar flares and coronal mass ejections are all about,” Tracy stalled, glancing at Rhonda.

“You’re right,” Rhonda agreed, returning an understanding nod.

Foster saw their silent exchange and briefly checked his wristwatch. It was already way past business hours. “Getting late. How about something to eat? I know a terrific steak place nearby. I’m buying.”

“I’m in,” Tracy said. “Lead on.”

Alex and Rhonda did not object. It would be a dinner accompanied by wine, food, and rib-eye, their favorite steak, with a great deal of social bonding. They appreciated the opportunity for a chance to share and to talk about recent encounters and experiences in a personal effort to save the country. Where close participants were well aware of the Bauer clan, their skills, missions, and accomplishments, the general public was unaware. The bonding was necessary to inspire each other for things yet to come and threats not yet identified.

GATE KEEPER

“Better get going,” Scott Brooks muttered above the resonating echoes of the mall. His eyes and ears were tuned in to the environment. It was as if he could hear every quirky sound emanating from shoppers’ lips. The sound of young children’s voices prolifically added to the echo level, bouncing against high ceilings and walls. Quickening his strides, loaded down by bags filled with newly-purchased apparel, he watched his steps to avoid bumping into the other shoppers bustling through the mall. He had spent more time here than he had anticipated. As was usual when among crowds, he scanned profiles for any sort of recognition. It was a habit he had acquired when trained by DELTA, the now defunct assassination squadron for the CIA. The directorate had been dismantled during the fall of the nation. The people would not tolerate any carryovers from the former administration. The shakeup that followed from within the New Republic saw to it. Many former government directorates were terminated. A new constitution was honored. The laws of the new society were strict, but fair. Everybody was welcomed to stay and become part of the reform as long as they obeyed the newly created laws. Sure, there were grumblings and complaints, but most came from former operatives and functionaries running up against the misfortune being eliminated through the collapse of the once-leading nation. Rusty Norton, elected leader of the New Republic, saw to it that the new constitution was carried out, observed, and respected.

“My stop,” Brooks told the bus driver just a block away from his condo. He needed to drop off the purchased items before proceeding to the docks. Since it was dark already, he was anxious to get going. Quickly chomping down a ham sandwich, he headed directly for the waterfront. Evening business had already picked up when he arrived at the bar he visited earlier that day. His gaze scanned the place for familiar and suspicious faces. “There they are.” He had spotted the two sailors from the early afternoon. He breathed a sigh of relief and muttered, “Good. I’m not too late. Must be waiting for their contact.”

Brooks mingled with the other patrons coming and going near a row of pool tables. He was not interested in the game since his focus was directed toward the activities of his targets. He did not have to wait for long. Cautiously stepping up to the table was a new arrival exhibiting similar traits to the two sailors acknowledging him. Brooks could not hear their conversation over the sound of bar clatter but assumed it was the contact they

had been waiting for since both left the table to follow the arrival's lead.

Brooks followed some distance behind, careful not to be detected. It turned out to be a short walk within a shadowy alley. The three entered a hotel nearby. The place was a reflection of the immediate environment: shabby, run down, with part of the neon lighting out. The entrance sign read, "D_ck Motel." It was anybody's guess if the missing letter was an i or an o. "Either way, it would fit," Brooks grinned into the semi-dark alley. Where the three disappeared inside, he loitered and waited.

For Scott Brooks it was a way of life, shadowing and investigating potential subversives. It was with his help that saved the country and allowed the turnaround after falling prey to hostile takeover not so long ago. "Well," he muttered in the quiet of night. "I had help." A hint of a smile came over his face when his thoughts touched on Stinger, his battle companion. It was a combined effort of him, Tracy, Big Red, Brody Elliott, and General Foster that eventually drove the hostile invasion from his country's shores. He wondered what she'd be doing, when thinking of her. Like it was just yesterday, he could remember her presence in every detail. He should. They'd tore at each other's bodies with such ferocity that the resultant actions would be permanently burned into his brain. He suddenly longed for her. Thinking of her brought on internal instincts only a warrior could truly appreciate. Much like on the battlefields, they had brought their fights into their personal space, the bedroom. But that has been months ago.

While observing, his eyes scanned the immediate surroundings. It was another cautionary act. Aside from switching TV scenes casting lights from darkened windows, signs advertising topless hostesses, a liquor store, a tobacco shop, the alley was dark and quiet. Every so often Brooks checked his wrist watch. He wanted to allow enough time for the sailors to either reappear, getting drunk, or went to sleep. It would make his job easier. The action he had in mind would depend on the sailor's reaction or cooperation. Either way, the outcome did not matter much as long as he obtained the information he needed. What he needed was names and locations of the source of the rising terrorist madness. In his mind, there was only one solution to secure the New Republic from potential perpetrators, eradicate the threat. Foremost on his mind was to restore order and maintain safekeeping. He longed for the days before the country's establishment was torn down. He missed the capability for every citizen to create a prosperous environment working toward a secure future followed by a deserving retirement. His mind

drifted in and out of the past.

Back in a time, when there was once a solid foundation created for the sole purpose of providing freedom and liberty through the gainful employment promised to each and every citizen, these basic principles, today, were in jeopardy. What the autocrats managing the various government and economic sectors seem to have forgotten was the masses, the people creating and producing the wealth. It was not the executives, whether political, governmental, or civilian-based, creating the foundation, infrastructure, and mechanisms to sustain the land. That was created by the people, the working force. Executives were meant to effectively manage the affairs, projects, and people. Flawed thinking of arrogance and greed took over that eventually brought the nation to the economic brink of becoming a third-world country.

We, as a nation living in a free world, were not prone to organized coup d'état, government overthrow, or national rebellion. The majority of the people would have to be on the threshold of complete economic collapse for that to happen. While the greater part of the workforce was still employed, a rebellion leading to eventual civil war would most likely not happen. Elements were already set in place to prevent such conflict from within. For one, over time, cultural merging and population expansion forced changes on the constitution through many amendments. But most important, the government secured its body of organizations with the inception of the NDAA³ act. It was this act that would keep the president in office, who was also commander-in-chief over all military branches, national guardsmen, and law enforcement, who would be immediately informed of any overthrow actions instigated by the people. It was the cleverest move ever made by a governing power.

Brooks, though taking personal pleasure in retrospective thoughts that inspired his rationale, kept checking the watch. "It's time," he muttered, prodding himself into action.

THE PENTAGON

Arriving at the steakhouse, requesting privacy, the general, Alex, Tracy, and Rhonda were seated in a relatively quiet corner of the usually busy place, and drinks were promptly served. It appeared that Foster had been here before because the party of four received preferential treatment. The assigned waiter came by frequently to refill drinks and check on when to serve dinner but was motioned off by the general until later. For now, most guests were absorbed in hushed conversation. "So," Foster directed at Tracy, "made any plans yet for a career? Sure could use you on my staff. The place is expanding. We've got a budget again. It's nothing like out west." He was referring to the years they had spent defending the shores from the tactical and temporary headquarters at the Presidio, operating on barter by trading off national treasures whenever required to acquire parts or services.

"Don't think I could stomach an office job." Just the very thought of sitting at a desk brought a shudder to her nerves. "I need open range and freedom."

"But," he countered, "it is where advancements and career futures are made."

"Rank of Colonel and Stinger Squad support is enough for me. I have no complaints. It keeps me busy, as you well know."

"Just let me know when you get tired of it. I'll keep a spot open for you."

"I will keep it in mind."

"Now." With a face turned serious, Foster shifted his gaze to Alex, seated across the table. "What's on your mind?"

"My mind," Alex explained while keeping his focus on the general, "is tuned in on what's on the minds of many of the public, especially the informed and concerned ones." After months of evasive confrontations with Foster, he finally had his say. Unwilling to create more concern than there already was with the public and guests seated nearby, he kept his voice subdued. "You may or may not be aware of what Weather Underground, you know, the people who closely follow political events and government infractions, are reporting?"

"You meant conspiracies?"

"That's the ones," Alex admitted. "But I want to assure you that I am not a proponent of conspiracies. I just listen in on their nightly talks, as radical as some are."

"Thought you'd turned renegade," Foster said with a smirk on the face.

“Foe.”

“Not at all,” Alex countered, slightly angered by the remark. “But I give ‘em a lot of credit on this one. Everybody is ticked off about the EMP since no action has been forthcoming by the government. It’s what has been on my mind. What is your excuse?” Alex had his concerns summed up and laid out on the table. It was the general’s turn to explain. Tracy and Rhonda were intensely waiting for the general’s response. Both knew exactly what Alex was driving at. He had voiced his concerns on many an occasion.

“You know,” Foster said. “There are things better left alone—remaining confidential. EMP falls into the category. People are better off not knowing.”

“That’s where the problem lies.” Alex could feel anger well up inside his chest. Like so many times in the past, when bringing up a serious topic, concern, or alarm, Foster rebuffed him. At times for the sake of national security, at others for the preservation of a black project, and now, the protection of and for the people, his blood started to boil. He had to voice his anger. “That’s a lot of crap.”

Foster was genuinely startled at Alex’s outburst after all that he had done for his friend and former combating partner. Alex realized he might have overstepped his boundaries but insisted, nevertheless. “It is an excuse I’ve heard too many times.”

“Now just wait a doggone minute. What gives you the right to be judgmental?” The general seemed equally perturbed.

“Because I am also a taxpayer. That’s why. I am sick and tired of hearing the same excuses without ever getting any justification when you damned well know what the problem is.”

“Enlighten me,” Foster beckoned, shifting closer to Alex. He, as well as Alex, by trade, was always security conscious to be overhead when the topic touched on sensitive issues.

“Budget overspending. Budget spending to only protects for government and military. Nothing ever flows back to the people. And they’re the ones funding it all.”

“You’re overreaching your authority,” Foster cautioned with a stern warning glance shot back. He would rather shut down the talks than have to justify, or worse, make excuses for government overspending. As it were, budget ceilings had to be raised on an annual basis for the government to stay operational and pay debts all with congressional blessings without the people’s say so. Alex, after what they had just gone through, years of misery,

could not, would not, allow a repeat of another collapse of the nation, a forsaken nation, a forsaken freedom.

“Hank,” Alex said, addressing the general somewhat calmer. “You have known me for many years. I would never put our friendship in jeopardy. Not before anything.”

“He wouldn’t,” Tracy cut in, confirming her dad’s conviction and dedication, as did Rhonda.

“Go on.” Foster said, slightly pacified, still reluctant to continue the topic.

“As I said,” Alex continued, “the EMP threat has turned critical. Critical not only for the people, but for me, for you, for us as well.”

“Explain.”

“Okay. Here are the facts. One, only government and military systems are protected against neutron bombardment.”

Foster was stalling. “Name one.”

“I’ll name ‘em all. Pentagon, White House, government data centers, power facilities.” After pausing a few seconds to retrieve additional information from his brain, he went on, “Military command and control, military space assets, Air Force One and Two, Marine One and Two. Wanna hear more?” Foster kept silent as Alex continued. “Military satellites—spying, surveillance, communications, the whole damned gambit. Need I say more?”

“Where’d you get all this info?”

“Worked your programs, remember? Not one of the civilian infrastructures is protected.”

“I know that,” Foster said, defending his position. “But we just don’t have the budget. You know how much all of this would cost?”

“I know exactly how much. I told you before,” Alex reminded him. “I worked out the budget for all of it. But nobody listens. I am at a point of taking it public.”

“You can’t do that.” Foster was surprised but adamant as well. “No civilian can.”

“Watch me.” Alex had said his piece. There was no cause to elucidate further since his reasoning was falling on deaf ears. Turning to Rhonda, he asked, “How’s your steak?”

“Just grand. By the way,” Rhonda addressed the general, “what’s our relationship with the NSA? Ever get a status back? Warner still in office?”

“Yeah,” Foster replied. “I am trying to sort things out with Jack.” In spite

of heavy protests by the people of the New Republic, the NSA was reinstated into the fold of national security with Jack Warner back as Chief of Operations. The reasons given were that the country needs a protective authority, a cyber space division, a cyber police.

“Yeah,” Alex said, sarcastically. “I’ve heard all that before.” It silenced the general.

The current administration might have honorable intentions, as was the case many times before, only time would tell their aims and their actions. After reading historical accounts on empires and nations, their rises and falls, it was easy to see that any government was prone to collapse unless mankind changed its mindset.

This nation was no exception to hostile advances, especially not after just emerging from an all-out attack. The citizens were all too happy that the economy, against many odds for saving the union, showed signs of a recovery, gradual but positive. As was generally the case, when the citizens were gainfully employed, as a whole, the economy strengthened. Nobody complained much. Money was flowing. People were getting paid. With lifestyles improving, who would complain about a government taking their just share?

After all, it was diligent citizens working within the walls of the Pentagon. And so, another economic cycle began.

“Tell you what I want,” Foster challenged Alex. “You write me a paper delineating all of your concerns and I will present it to the board.”

“Understood. How much time do I have?”

“Oh.” Foster considered with a testy grin on his face. “One week.”

“Good enough for me,” Alex promised. It ended Foster’s dinner invitation. All got up, bidding the general goodbye with Alex holding the last word. “No hard feelings?”

“Buddies forever,” Foster said, leaving a grueling evening behind in hope that somebody in the Pentagon hierarchy would listen to reason. It was and some in his company were about to doze off, “Enough lecture for today. Let’s get going.” It was then when they realized the place had emptied. Only the restaurant manager remained to bid them off in a somewhat annoyed face, “Thank you. Please come again.”

Alex, Tracy, and Rhonda said goodbye to the general with a promise to keep closely connected in the future. That, at the present time, was not an empty promise with Rhonda working at the Pentagon and Alex and Tracy

headquartered at the Castle exchanging information on a regular basis.

For Alex, his trip to visit with Foster, and especially seeing Rhonda after weeks of her absence from the Castle, was a refreshing event. He felt that he'd achieved his goals with the general as well as strengthen his relationship with Rhonda. It was not the first time they were separated by necessity. As long as she had the desire to further her career, with the opportunity extended by Foster, the separation was only a temporary measure as accepted by both.

Where Foster headed in the direction of the Pentagon, Rhonda, tired from the alcohol but still able to navigate, drove back to her apartment. The three were bound to talk some more, if only to rehash the evening's topics.

GEORGETOWN

The three headed for Rhonda's apartment which she was renting in the Georgetown district. They arrived at the quiet neighborhood, close to Rhonda's workplace. After parking her vehicle, bidding them getting seated, they got comfortable in her living room listening to the subdued sounds from songs of the '60s, while being served brandy. "Okay," Rhonda offered, "everybody comfy?" All responded with smiles and nods. "Why don't you share some of your concerns with us," she prodded Alex, knowing he was only too willing to talk about his favorite topic, particle physics, the basic element for EMP. Rhonda and Tracy, knowledgeable of atomic effects on the environment and its detonated aftermath did not have the scientific perspective on nuclear science to the extend Alex had. They let him take the lead explaining.

"What exactly happens during an EMP strike?"

Though Alex always enjoyed the company of his present companions, whenever an opportunity was presented, he felt at home expounding the elements, any element. It was his calling, had been and ever would be. Yet, to the consternation of both of his listeners, at times, the tech talk became too much and they would request a timeout, but it proved not to be the case tonight. The topic was too critical to be shunned. For now, both paid close attention to what he had to say.

"As a prelude to EMP," he started, "ever since the inception of the atom bomb, more than sixty years ago, Electro-magnetic pulsing had been a co-created energy product. As such, it is one of several destructive forces generated by neutron forces when the bomb is set off during the explosion. Although not a lethal component to man and animal life, its forces can be devastating to technologically-advanced nations. Modern technology uses sensitive equipment and devices such as computers, communication components, any kind of handheld devices including cell phones, iPhones, smart phones, iPads, automobile electronics, home, office, data center facilities, satellites and tower transmissions, all fed by power by its various industry infrastructures.

"It's like this," Alex said, taking an extended breath to focus on the topic at hand. "Without getting into specifics and boring technology session, I'll let the scientists speak for themselves, through documented accounts from what I remember, from the '50s when atom bombs were developed."⁴

"We appreciate your consideration," Tracy said. "Go on." She highly

appreciated his all around knowledge on most things—not only was he well versed in technology, but society, cultural affairs, the arts, foreign nations with their peoples and customs, and especially his favorite subject history, as well. Extremely sensitive on worldly affairs, he did not express his political views much. It seemed to bring on nothing but clearly visible disappointment and frustration when he was pressed on the topic.

“And I quote,” Alex continued. “The most important mechanism for EMP production from a nuclear detonation is the ionization of air molecules by gamma rays generated from the explosion. The resultant burst of energy, which produces a powerful electromagnetic field, is called an electromagnetic pulse. EMP can also be produced from non-nuclear sources, such as electromagnetic bombs, or E-bombs.

“High-altitude nuclear detonations and electromagnetic bombs can generate EMP that has the potential to damage or destroy electronic devices over widespread areas. Electric power systems would also be at risk from surges carried through power lines produced by such weapons. However, the EMP blast from a kiloton-range surface-based nuclear explosion would not be expected to produce serious damage outside the immediate radius of,” he stipulated, “half a mile radius.”

“How radioactive is an EMP blast?” Rhonda had her concerns. Where the concerns this evening were directed toward nuclear powered bombs, considered dirty bombs, the focus was more centered on the EMP technology with its side effects, since a nuclear threat from a superpower, at this time, was not of immediate concern.

“EMP is not radioactive, but the destructive burst of energy produced as a side effect of a nuclear detonation bomb is.”

“What about the health effects?”

“EMP has no known effect on living organisms, but will temporarily or permanently disable electrical and electronic equipment. We all know that society has entered the information age and is dependent on electronic systems that work with components that are very susceptible to excessive electric currents and voltages. Many of these electronic systems are controlled in some way by super-sensitive semiconductors.

“Commercial computer equipment is also vulnerable to EMP effects. Computers used in data processing systems, communications systems, displays, industrial control applications, including road and rail signaling, and those embedded in military equipment, such as signal processors, electronic

flight controls and digital engine control systems, are all potentially vulnerable to the EMP effect.

“Other electronic devices and electrical equipment may also be destroyed by the EMP effect. Telecommunications equipment can be highly vulnerable and receivers of all varieties are particularly sensitive to EMP. Consequently,” he explained. “Radar and electronic warfare equipment, satellite, microwave, UHF, VHF, HF and low band communications equipment and television equipment are all potentially vulnerable. Cars with electronic ignition systems and ignition chips are most susceptible.

“Some other notable and highly vulnerable collectors and disseminators of EMP include railroad tracks, large antennas, pipes, cables, wires in buildings, and metal fencing. Although materials underground are partially shielded by the ground, they are still collectors, and these collectors deliver the EMP energy to some larger facility. This produces surges that can destroy the connected device, such as power generators or long distance telephone systems.”

“In other words,” Tracy volunteered, “everything we use and depend on is affected.”

Rhonda had been listening patiently while having her concerns and wanted to know, “What can be done to protect electronics?”

“There are two basic ways to protect or harden items against EMP effects. The first method is metallic shielding made of continuous piece of metal such as steel or copper. A metal enclosure generally does not fully shield the interior because of the small openings that are likely to exist. Therefore, this type of shielding often requires additional elements to create the barrier. Commonly, only a fraction of a millimeter thickness of metal is needed to supply adequate protection but must completely surround the item to be hardened.

“The second method, tailored hardening, is a more cost-effective way of hardening. In this way, the most vulnerable elements and circuits need to be redesigned to be rugged. The hardened elements will be able to withstand much higher currents.”

“What about EMP as a weapon?”

“The non-lethal nature of electromagnetic weapons makes their use far less politically damaging than that of conventional munitions, and therefore broadens the range of military options available. Several adversary nations, including terrorist organizations are reported to have developed non-nuclear

devices, dirty bombs, capable of generating destructive EMP small enough to fit in a briefcase.

“Regardless of the method of delivery, experts agree that EMP can be powerful enough to cripple electronic wiring and circuitry over a geographic area, thousands of square miles, posing a real threat to any critical infrastructure.

“What about you, Dad? What was the project you were involved with?” Tracy was curious about the times when her dad would or could not talk about projects he was involved with. During her childhood years, when she queried him, her mom would readily jump in with, “Don’t bother him, Sweetie. Dad can’t talk about his work.” And that was it. He would make up by telling her and her sister bedtime stories until they could not keep their eyes open any longer and promptly fell asleep. But that was then. Situations had changed. Information had been declassified, and data was readily available on the Internet. But who had the time to research and read?

“Do tell,” Rhonda encouraged him as well. “Ready for a refill?”

“Could use some more of your fine brandy,” he replied. “I would never turn down Napoleon. Finest in the world.”

“Tracy?”

“I’m fine. Thanks.”

“All right then,” Alex pressed on. Brandy, in great company, always mellowed out his mind set. Who could ask for more? He was in the element he liked best. “Last project I designed was...” He proceeded to tell them about the time he was commissioned to redesign the nation’s missile defense systems, namely the Minuteman and Peacekeeper underground launch control centers and missile silos against a direct hit by a nuclear explosion. It touched on the very topic they’d been concerned, health and survivability wise. He talked. They listened.

TROUBLED NATIONS

As if it was not enough facing potential danger created by the sun, more and more news flashes were interrupting daily broadcasts alerting the public. Reports received from attacks by terrorists from all around the world via international wires had been on the increase lately. Business seemed to be thriving for both, news media and extremist factions. Where one was a concern for the safety of the afflicted country's citizens, the adversaries concern was for recruiting new militia members. Since their instigated conflicts were splintered across numerous extremist factions spread not only over local districts, as well as large regions, and several continents, the threat was difficult to contain without effectively coordinated counter intelligence. At this point, there seemed to be no effective organization controlling the ever-widening threat. For the political analyst, the nationally informed and worldly knowledgeable, the handwriting was clearly spelled out Jihad was on the move.

The United Nations council, after revising many of its international directives and charters, this morning was up in arms. With recent terrorist attacks experienced in many countries, an alert flag was not necessary to spur the piece-keeping organization into action. The threat was real. The threat was now. It was a combined effort in conflict, seemingly organized and directed under new ruling globally organized. The realization of it shook everybody from complacency when alerted.

"Order please," Kazim Rashid, Secretary General, demanded today's opening session. "We have a global emergency." As always, it took several such calls to quiet the assembly for him to proceed. "You have all been informed via express delivery of the urgent change in policy directives set forth by our advisory panel. It is my duty to explain the changes to you and open up discussions for debates on the various topics. However," he cautioned, "it must be held in strict confidence." Where some took the chance to glance at the contents within the stated document over the weekend, most had not taken the time to read. Consequently, there was an exalted expectation of importance to whatever the directives might be.

"From here on forthwith," he began, reading the first bulleted item. "No U.N. member nation is permitted to harbor terrorist factions or radicalized, ill intentioned proponents." Being the first of a number of critical issues listed, Rashid could not proceed further. He was immediately interrupted with unruly, disobedient behavior. "Quiet, quiet," he kept shouting, trying to

subdue the uproar. It was something he had not expected. Tolerated terrorism, he thought with great dismay, must be more prevalent than anyone had expected.

Where in past decades, beginning with the Munich massacre attack on the Summer Olympics of 1972 by the Palestinian terrorist group Black September, quickly followed with the Italian paramilitary organization Red Brigades, the Baader-Mainhof Gang, the Symbionese Liberation Army, al Qaeda, on through the 80s, 90s into the 20th century, followed by dozens more factions to the present day, these groups once isolated by time, country, and continents, today, were either dissolved or had been consolidated under one leadership, that of Islamic extremists. What was alarming was the unification into one organized army of paramilitary bodies indoctrinated, well trained, and ready to fight anybody opposing Islam for its justified cause with a common slogan, "Death to the Infidels."

As alarming the threat was, still in its united infancy, it was a rude awakening for all nations adhering to Christianity, more so for the Americans and its Westernized attitude, considered the root-cause of all evil. Rashid, as well as many of the attending representatives were caught up by utter surprise. "How can it be? Who could have let it happen," were some of the assaults thrown at him. In trying to regain control, he shouted into the assembly, "We are all at fault." He had forced the ears of all attending. Repeating, "We are all at fault. No exceptions. It was us," he gestured, waving his leveled arm at the members, "that shut their eye and minds. It was us that let it happen." He then proceeded to explain, "Here," he offered, tossing a stack of folders across the table, "I advise you to read its contents. It will refresh your commitment to the charter you all signed up for, the United Nations, a peace loving, dignified organization. "What have we become, harboring criminals, mercenaries, and thugs, all in the name of Allah? Shame on us!" He paused to let his words sink in, then "Not only are we abiding elements of terror, even worse, some of us are financing their very causes of violence. It must stop," he bellowed into the quieted hall. "It must stop here and now."

Rashid did not even have a chance to address the other issues when he adjourned the assembly. There was no reason to proceed further. Member representatives, as disgraced as the accused were, left without so much as acknowledging the claim. Too much blood money had already been paid out for it to stop. Terrorism was here to stay, indefinitely.

MEGA THREATS

The following morning, after a troublesome sleep Alex got up early and went to work. Using Rhonda's study room, he was anxious to prepare the paper he had promised the general. In spite of the massive amount of information and technology associated with EMP and terrorist attacks, he tried to keep the dissertation as brief as possible. He knew that reading patience in Congress and executive panels was limited. Proofing the final draft, he was satisfied with his results. It read:

“This report is written to serve as a word of warning to the government of the New Republic on national security and related issues. It addresses the vulnerability of the nation potentially subjected to the following disasters causes: Cosmic event, solar strike, adverse superpower threat, rogue nation assault, and terrorist attack.

“Creating a successful nation takes many elements with some of the major ones being geographic location, educational dedication, technological savvy, industrial spirit, and national security, to mention a few. It is this developing cycle which assures the eventual sustainability of the country. Whereas most elements are conditions developed by the people, there is one specific element created by the authority controlling the people. It is cyber security, the major branch for safeguarding the country. Much like an insurance carrier protecting the individual from potential demise caused by an unforeseen accident or disaster, so is the national security branch for the protection of a nation. It is this security that protects the communities, wealth, and wellbeing, but it comes with an expensive price tag. It has been said and written on many accounts that the ‘Cost of Freedom is high.’ It is this freedom that national security is protecting.

“It is a freedom we believe we have deservedly earned not only through personal sweat and tears, but from many sacrifices made by the individual. Much of our earnings, the greater percentage of the tax dollars, are funneled toward the defense budget. It is an expense tolerated, though reluctantly, by most as long as it is managed reverently. This, however, is only possible with everybody respecting national resources, whether minerals or people, for both are regarded as precious resources necessary to support a nation's wealth and growth. But it is not only the freedom we are trying to preserve. Others with more devastating and more lasting effects could occur at any time such as a major solar flare, an attack from a superpower, a rogue or hostile nation, or an unexpected cosmic event. The possibilities are manifold with magnitudes

dependent on likelihood, frequency, and scale. Any one of such a disaster is likely to occur. The question is when.

“It is the short term threats of which we must create special awareness. For their likelihood and vulnerabilities could be imminent. Though we have the most advanced developed defense network in the world, monitored by numerous intelligence agencies for their respective sphere of responsibilities, underground and adverse activities could spawn within, securely hidden amidst the population. It is this hazard to which the once strategically arranged Cold War threat has shifted. It is tactical terrorism that we must be aware of because it could take place at any moment in any given location, causing dramatic effects to the individual, local populace, or entire region. Whether we accept it or not, terrorism has become part of our daily lives. One only has to follow the news and mainstream media reporting events by the hour to become aware of the threats placed on the world.

“It is these threats that place an ever present danger not only on the citizen but the infrastructure as well. Not only is our infrastructure in a fragile state, due to a variety of reasons, it would not take much of an effort to completely cripple the nation. Following is a brief synopsis with highlights presented for pros, cons, and alternatives.

Thunder and Lightning

“Lightning strikes have been with us long before mankind made its presence on Earth. Fortunately for all living beings they are of a magnitude to cause only localized and limited damages to man, beast, and infrastructure when struck directly. While lightning strikes occur prolifically around the globe, their presences have been accepted by all living beings as an ever present, natural phenomenon. Depending on local customs and cultural acceptances, such strikes can be a welcomed event for it usually carries with it the promise of cool air and the blessings of rain. For the most part, lightning, thunder, and clouds are a relief, if only temporary, as long as nobody gets hurt and nothing is destroyed.

“While someday lightning could be harnessed as an alternative source of energy, for the time being, we will have to be content with it as mostly a threat. As long as our Earth contains an abandoned amount of raw material resources in metals, minerals, and precious commodities, near term sources for energy will most likely remain that of fossil fuel supplemented by hydro-electric, geothermal, nuclear, wind, and solar energies.

“Where science realizes that lightning contains an awful amount of

energy, to harness it outside of laboratories for the consumption of home and industrial energy sources still remains an undertaking for laboratories to develop. For now, because man is a creature of habit and convenience, not much will change for the near term, besides marginal and sporadic research and development. We realize that there are other factors involved limiting research and development progress, such as protective nations controlling and managing much of earth's wealth and in the process polluting the Earth and raking it for its resources.

“Aside from production efforts and consumption levels, there is the health issue. But as long as the majority of the population can afford to carry health insurance with medical and pharmaceutical companies thriving on the citizen's demise, not many changes will take place within the innate abusing industry. Changes, if any, will have to come from our next generations who, in the wake of proper education, will have enough enlightenment to realize the greed and corruption prevalent in our present societies.

Cosmic Event

“Cosmic event, primarily caused by a supernova explosion is somewhat of a rare event, estimated to occur once every several million years. They may be quite common in the reaches of the universe, and one may have touched Earth millions of years ago, consequently wiping out previous life forms such as the dinosaurs. Most likely, in our lifetime, it will not present a threat to us. While one such force may be on its way, headed in our direction from the distance of our own or another remote galaxy, the event most likely would only last seconds before incinerating all life on Earth. It would be the end of mankind, animal, and plant life on this planet for a long time to come.

“Fortunately for us, based on the prolific monitoring the skies by a diligent, ever wakeful task force, there is no indication such an event is imminent or in the makings, so our astronomers claim. For the time being, we can continue living without considering such an event to be a likely threat. Aside from the periodic asteroid hitting Earth, which is considered a minor strike compared to other astronomical events, there are four major events that could eradicate all life form on Earth, namely: dark energy, gamma-ray burst, interacting galaxy, and stellar black hole.

Superpower and Rogue nation

“The superpowers of past, for the generations that lived through them, were

an epoch we would rather forget. Where the dangers of it, for most part, have slipped into the past, military forces supporting the defense grid are still keenly aware of their existence. Where our government, over the past decades, had greatly reduced the size of the nuclear stockpile inventory, our adversaries, in contrast, have not. Theirs have been greatly increased and are very much alive, and they are ready to deploy their superior nuclear forces without prior notice. As a result, MAD⁵ could be rendered ineffectual by either side regardless of policies in place. MAD was only effective as long as it was respected by all participating nuclear powered nations. Where such destructive devices could, and must, be effectively managed, radical policies, for most part, cannot. Humans in power could be unreliable and behave unpredictably, for which I cite Russia, North Korea, and Iran as examples.

“Although the action forces at NORAD are continuously monitoring, what is left from a once matching destructive force is diligent training to keep proficient in all aspects of our nuclear shield safely hidden from view below ground. Unfortunately, where the major superpowers in the past were only two, the U.S. pitted against the Soviet Union, there are other governments emerging with similar destructive forces, notably China, North Korea, Pakistan, Iran, and, to a lesser extent, India, France, and more. Whether for economic or military purposes, all are demanding equal status among world nations, which in the past was mostly reserved for European allies. With the dynamic changes in politics and military taking place around the globe, peace, it seems, is only a short lived commodity. It must be treasured and proliferated at all cost.

Terrorist Attack

“The ever-present threat from erratic and irrational behavior by radical factions such as Jihad and ISIS, as network news and mainstream media report, is real. It is important to fully understand the reasons and purposes caused by terrorist factions imposed on the free world society. Whether democratic, socialistic, Islamic or any other denomination, by nature, when it comes to beliefs and ideologies, all parties follow similar principles in characteristics. It is that of achieving alliance, coalition, and unison. This striving has been prevalent throughout history dating back through all the previous kingdoms from recent monarchies, to the Roman Republic, to Greek, Egyptian, Byzantine, and more distant empires dating back to pre-biblical times. Today is no difference. As every dictator could attest to,

whoever has the power rules the world.

“Presently, where an attack from our once feared superpower adversary, the USSR, used to be our country’s primary threat, the dangers since the end of the Cold War have greatly diminished but given way to a more impending menace. The new menace, tactical in nature, is not a force concentrated to well established, and well known launch facilities. An attack could come from any direction at any time, whether by sea, land, or air. It is a threat chiefly instigated by terrorist factions fighting for their specific causes, whether religious, national, cultural, or idealistic in nature. A terrorist attack may not have the devastating effects, as for instant, a direct nuclear hit from a superpower with advanced warning following failed political tension or diplomatic negotiations. It could be a much greater danger because of its dynamics, quick to emerge, and varied unpredictability.

“Whether we like it or no, local, regional, and global terrorism is here to stay. We have to deal with it much like any newly-created economic sector. Much investment and support, predominantly from Arabic wealth, mostly by Islamic-centric nations, are being invested for the purpose of expanding their religious and nationalistic driven causes. Whereas the free world is looking at their causes from a malevolent point of view, they believe it is an act of benevolence to convert mankind into one religion, that of Islam. Every other belief system carrying a different label such as Christianity, Judaism, Hinduism, and, to a less pressing extent, Buddhism and Confucianism would be eradicated from the globe, if the free world would permit it. One must understand that, although Muslims have proliferated across all continents and infiltrated every country on the globe, they do not have a dedicated nation they could claim as their own. It is the present push from ISIS to create such a place, that of ISIL⁶, they could eventually stake claim on.

“To those informed on worldly affairs, unless drastic changes take place within free world governments, those nations have already sold out to the great Muslim expansion felt in every corner on earth. One only has to follow world news and information trends to observe the ever-increasing pressure from terrorist factions, funded for a combined cause, to realize their drive for world dominance. It does not mean one should persecute the Muslims. Like every other country on Earth, the people are decent, industrious, and striving to gain similar values that the free world enjoys: freedom, independence, and prosperity. Those are basic values which are national birthrights bestowed on every living being no matter what country we live in, but not necessarily

observed by every state. It is those values that our conscious being elevates us on and above the animal kingdom. We can consider ourselves fortunate for having an intelligence level that sets us above every other living thing on Earth whether animal, plant, mineral, and any other substance created either by man, nature, or the creator of the universe.

TERRORISM IDEOLOGY

Twenty years earlier, the question was posed to Alex, forever attendant father when he was home, “Daddy, do you think I’m prejudice?” It had startled him. Seated in his recliner as he usually was on weekends after breakfast, he momentarily paused and stopped reading the morning paper to look up at his daughter, who had quietly moved alongside him. What surprised him was the question asked by someone at such a young age. She had just started first grade where her teacher must have touched on the subject. It was Tracy, age six, standing next to Alex, twisting her fingers together in anticipation, waiting impatiently for him to answer. He had to think twice to come up with a suitable response she would understand and accept. Then, he suddenly realized the problem. He did not know when he was her age. She did not know either. Not at her age. Her mind was empty of most knowledge that we, learned adults, acquired during a lifetime of tilling. Whatever his answer was would stay with her forever. “We all are,” he finally replied.

“I don’t understand,” she said, looking at him with the most innocent eyes a face could reflect.

“Come,” he said while lifting her onto his lap. “Let me tell you a story.” Like so many times before, she leaned back against his shoulder, waiting patiently for another thrilling tale. He was a great storyteller, a skill acquired mostly from events occurring during his many travels to far-off lands while working government contracts. At once, Tracy and her sister were thrilled by the strange and foreign tales he relayed, which usually ended with them falling asleep from sheer mental exhaustion. He treasured those distant moments. It was a time filled with adventure, excitement, and enlightenment. Reflecting on the past, retrieved memories brought a soft smile to his face.

“Daddy,” she insisted. It brought his mind back to reality.

“You have school friends, social friends and family,” he said. “Don’t you?”

“Yeah?”

“You like ‘em all?”

She hesitated before answering, then said, “No.”

“Why not?” Alex pressed on, seeking out her confused face.

“Some are nice, some are nasty and mean.”

“Okay then.”

“What?”

“You are prejudice.”

“I don’t understand,” she claimed. “I have Asian and Black friends.”

“Let’s define prejudice,” he replied. “Showing intolerance, unfairness, and dislike for race, sex, religion, etc.”

“What’s the ‘etc.’?”

“Everything else you dislike about a person.”

“You sure?” She still sounded doubtful about the definition. “I’ll have to ask Teach,” she finally conceded. At her age, it was the know-it-all teacher fueling her mind.

“You do that. A long time ago,” he began, “when I was about your age, I grew up by a beautiful lake surrounded by hills and mountains with peaks covered with snow for most of the year. In spring, the climate was mild so grass, flowers, and trees would grow everywhere. People living there would go to the farm each day to buy milk, bread, fruit, and many more things one could enjoy. Animals grazed across the fields as far as one could see. Countless flocks of sparrows flew in the sky in the fall preparing to migrate south and return in spring, accompanied by storks, swans, and geese. Everything was in harmony until people, tourists, began to show up during summertime. Each year the numbers increased until the travelers from the north migrated through all areas. I took to disliking the many strange faces speaking dialects I could not understand. Now,” Alex said, “do you understand?”

“You turned prejudice.”

“That’s right, but I didn’t know and neither did they, because they never talked to me until one day a stranger approached me, asking for direction. I could not understand what he was saying in his northern dialect and neither did he understand me living in the south.”

“What did you do?”

“He scolded me for being stupid and a dimwit and I just stood there swallowing his insults. It was then when I learned what prejudice was. You see, most vacationers in Europe migrate south, much like the birds. The only problem is nobody understands each other unless you and they learn each other’s language. Somebody has to compromise and make the attempt and it’s usually not the visitor.”

“Did you?”

“Not only one time but several more. It’s how I got along in the world. So you see,” Alex said, giving her a fatherly hug, “it’s not only the color of skin that causes unfairness. There are many things that can bring on prejudice.”

“Like what?”

“Oh,” he stalled for a few seconds, then said, “there’s religion, ethnicity, language, social class, gender, physical disabilities, age, or sexual orientation.”

“What?”

His words were obviously too foreign for her to understand, but it left a question on both of their minds. For her, it formed a lasting impression. For him, it was a problem he was about to set out to solve.

To fully appreciate and understand the concept and ideology of terrorism, one should begin with a clear mindset free of all preconceived notions. But, as an adult, that would be an impossible task. Being human, there were feelings, or rather conditions, each and every one of us have acquired through environmental influx, social connection, and daily exposure to events whether local, regional, or global, all pressing on our receptor senses as we were bombarded with information, data, and images. Some were good while others not so pleasant. When it came to network news, wire services, and mainstream media, it was mostly disturbing or bad. “Good news doesn’t sell,” was the common consensus. People were conditioned to tuning in on the extraordinary, the amazing, and the bizarre. It was part of human nature. And so was prejudice and discrimination, acquired states of mind influencing many of our conscious and subconscious tasks we performed on a daily basis. Though found throughout every corner of the globe, harboring prejudice was a state many of us pushed aside, ignored, or outright denied. It was too controversial a subject to consider discussing or dwelling on. But sooner or later, all of us were confronted by it, whether political, religious, or secular in nature. For the undereducated, it was a topic mostly avoided. For the educated and intellect, it was a topic subjected to lively discussion, individual expression, and to the extreme, ending in shouting and fighting bouts. It all depended on our personal convictions.

Touching on the extremely sensitive and highly controversial subjects, such as faith, religion, or secular ideals, as was the case in much of the modern world, in many cases was an inherent predisposition. With the information and wealth of ready-to-be-viewed data retrieved from uncountable computer-managed databases, available and rapidly accessible throughout the Internet, one would think that prejudice would be a thing of the past. But that was not the case.

Today, twenty years later, daughter and dad were touching on the very same topic once more. Though with age, after growing up and striding through life, the causes may have shifted, but the principles were still there. Once again it was Tracy insisting, "I'm not prejudice."

Again, Alex insisted, "We all are."

Back at the Castle after their return from the Pentagon and their visit with the general, they were discussing the present state of the globe and its instability, caused by an ever present, potentially devastating threat, that of ISIS, ISIL, Jihad, Al Qaeda and terrorism in general. "Let me refresh your memory." After a halting moment, he said, "I'll do even better. Let me educate you." Where others acquire knowledge on certain things mostly through mainstream media, Alex, being a history buff, dug deeper, much deeper. He delved into history itself to where it all started. "First," he began, "you must understand the principles behind a cause. In this case," he briefly paused to recollect on distant events, "Jihad is different from many other factions fighting for their specific causes."

"How so?"

"It's different because it is a calculated initiative based on ancient roots deeply seated and driven by Allah and its founder Muhammad⁷."

Tracy was not sure of her dad's state of mind. "Have you turned pacifist?"

"No. Not at all," he insisted. Though an accusatory statement, he did not feel that way. He was keenly aware of individual sentiments when discussing a faith sensitive topic. He was a lifelong scholar in human behavior. "I just have a different perspective on topics most people take for granted. You are not exempt." She was about to object again when he interrupted, "Please let me explain."

She curtailed her immediate resistance. "Go on."

"Okay. Remember, you asked for it. So, be patient. Here are the facts. The principle elements in the construct of terrorism can be best explained as follows: assassinations, an emphasis on the surprise nature of attacks, the quest for shocking the community, the indiscriminate and random killing of persons, especially civilians and non-combatants.

"Pretty heavy stuff." Tracy said.

"Much like you when on a mission," Alex remarked. He tried to make it casual but it brought on an immediate reaction.

"I don't kill innocent people!" she shouted at him.

"I know. I know," he parried. "In your case it's considered lateral

casualties.” She was about to object again, but he quieted her with, “Let’s move on.” He gave her a minute to calm down, then said, “I was out of line.”

“Not entirely,” she said, making amends. After considering his harsh accusation, she realized what he had meant. She knew from past experience that he looked at things mostly from a logical perspective. There was never an alternative, an underlying motive when he spoke, unless it was an interjection with a dry humor anecdote. He was precise and to the point, and that she appreciated, most times.

“Terrorism,” he moved on, “though considered by each and every member of an ideology fighting for whatever just cause, can be considered as an extreme form of expression, which is most contrary to the values of democracy, civilization and humanity. Terrorist acts, methods, and practices seem to be adopted by movements, which are of an exclusionist nature, refusing the priority and responsibility of living together with ‘the other’ that is thought to be different. Racism, religious fundamentalism, and ethno-nationalism are such exclusionist movements which adopt terrorist methods. The followers of these movements practically accuse the target groups of being the source of all evil. In the case of religious fundamentalism, the members of ‘the others’ are qualified as infidels and are perceived as the main obstacle to the restoration of the blessed order of the initial phase of the religion. The ethno-nationalists are obsessed by the real or imagined historical victimization incurred on them by the majority and fight to separate their group from the rest of the society.

“Terrorist groups project all sorts of derogatory attributes onto their target groups in a way that dehumanizes them. Thus, violence can be directed without much remorse against the members of the target group. Terrorism is the preferred form of violence which acquires, in this context, a conscious and systematic nature, serving a specific ‘political’ goal. They perversely feel justified to employ any means to that end.

“Terrorism, likewise, is a major violation of one of the most fundamental human rights, the right to life. By creating a climate of fear, terrorism also violates every individual’s right to live free from fear, as stated in the preamble of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights⁸. By recruiting and using minors as combatants, terrorists also violate the provisions of the Convention on the Rights of the Child⁹. As terrorism grossly and systematically violates human rights, it is only natural to consider it as a

crime against humanity.”

Tracy was fascinated by her dad’s knowledge. Although he may not be the originator of the information, his retention powers were incredible to her. Completely confused by now about how she felt, what she should believe in, and how to confront the future, she needed to hear more. “What about some of the other radical factions? Al-Qaeda for example. What’s their cause for justice?”

“Okay. Let’s take a look at their ideology. As you’ll probably remember, al-Qaeda¹⁰ was formed by Osama bin Laden. He not only needed a baseline for his cause but also a base of operations. Already for decades, he realized that Muslims were being discriminated by many nations and cultures.”

“Do you know this as fact?”

“Our mainstream media may not report foreign sentiments, but believe me,” Alex assured her, “I’ve spent many times in Asia and Pacific Rim countries to experience their ideology at first hand. Muslim culture, with its Islamic ideology is spreading across the globe. Initially, it was mostly al-Qaeda and its immediate followers fighting the oppressors of Islam. But that’s already changing.”

“I can see it. They are recruiting willing subjects from our country as well as others in the western world.”

“Right,” Alex continued. Their slogan, “If you are not supporting al-Qaeda, then you are supporting the oppressors. The oppressors, for their cause, are none-Islamic nations.”

“Practically the whole world,” Tracy agreed.

“There is much more to it than what the world perceives.”

“What do you mean?” Tracy asked.

“There is an inherited hatred against all none believers for the Islamic faiths. Al-Qaeda sees its mission to be the vanguard of the uprising of the oppressed. It knows it cannot achieve these goals by itself, so it needs to inspire the masses with an uplifting message intended to create a revolution. It’s clear that the basic grievances of al-Qaeda, real and imagined, are political, not religious. The window dressing that’s used in their documents is almost always religious, as are the justifications for violence. However, the problems raised in the texts are those of classic identity politics: oppression, poverty, and exploitation are common themes.”

“I better start reading the Koran,” Tracy suggested.

“Not just the Koran,” Alex said. “The true ideology is hidden from the

public. Its archives are mostly accessible to scholars.

“What about ISIS and ISIL?” It was getting more confusing for her.

“Forget ISIS. They are fanatical thugs. They are beyond reasoning. Nobody can educate them. They just fight for the sake of fighting. Most are too dumb, or in Western-indoctrinated cases, misinformed. “Heard enough?” Alex was slightly concerned about his daughter. Other than asking questions she hadn’t said a word or voiced her opinion on what he had just explained.

“I’ve heard enough for one day. I needed a break.” Ideals she had to deal with in the past, and now, more confusing, fashioned an uncertain future. There was only one more aspect she needed to have cleared up. It was an important one. Her entire life, her cause, and her conviction depended on it. “How can I effectively deal with Jihad in the future?”

“There is only one way to look at it,” Alex, in his infamous sphere on knowledge, stated. “From our perspective, that of democracy, and from the free world’s perspective, that of peace, Jihad is terrorism, and Jihad is the enemy.”

“Because?”

“Because they seek world dominance. Dominance over our basic principles, our customs, traditions, beliefs, and the very essence of existence.”

“Give me an example, please.”

“Would you feel comfortable walking around veiled from head to toe covered in Islamic garb? Stooping on your knees five times a day, facing Mecca to pray to Allah? Walking six paces in back of your husband clutching the Koran in your hands?” Alex let her mull it over. He knew the very thought of it would shake her to the very core.

And it obviously had when she yelled out, “Never! Not in a million years.” He had expected nothing less. He’d seen the reaction many times in the past when touching on the topic with others. It was the reason he usually stayed away from discussing politics and religion. It brought out fury in people.

“Let’s quit,” he said with finality. “We can talk more some other time. And, believe me, there is more—lots more.”

NEW REPUBLIC

Elected leader for the New Republic, President, and Commander in Chief of the Armed Forces, Rusty Norton, in the presence of Brodie Elliott, General Foster, and other heads of state and industrial delegates, was seated in the House of Representatives debating necessary options associated with the new constitution and laws. Discussions were heated at times with accusations of neglect, incompetence, and ignorance being shot around the hall. The general, like many times before, was under the chopping block one again, being accused by public delegates of greed, corruption, and power mongering. "Order...order!" the administrative host demanded, wildly hammering the gavel on the table. "Let's not waste anymore time. Let the past be past!" Accusations had been flying rampant, trying to find justification for the lack of security and other shortcomings for the nation. Norton, as usual, let them have their say. He knew quite well that, in order to appease the public, you had to occasionally let them voice off steam. It was a safety valve necessary to keep order in the long term. Today was no different. The agenda was severe. Solutions had to be sought, and without delay. An impending threat for a strike on the failing infrastructure, whether EMP from solar flares or terrorist action, was too real. If struck, it could send the country back into the Dark Ages. It could mean the end of a free nation. While the delegates were seeking justification, Norton sat back quietly, reflecting on his past and how he wound up here as head of state, letting them have their day of griping.

The creation of a new nation was heralded by the citizens of the New Republic more so than he had expected. Looking back five years to when he was a dedicated soldier in the armed forces, following orders and obeying rules and regulations, he never could have imagined the turn of events his career would take. He still marveled at taking the one and only opportunity provided, instigating a breakout from Fort Leavenworth to free himself and the other detainees from sheer military tyranny. He'd been incarcerated for a minor infraction, being late for roll call one day after visiting his girlfriend. "Justice had done injustice," he'd felt back then.

Following a five year sentence for getting back on post late, "Forget it," he grumbled after the verdict was read. After being imprisoned already for one year, he had been waiting for his chance to escape. "I'll have a one-time shot," he figured. "There's no second chance if I get caught." Penitentiaries were merciless with escapees. When word got out of yet another escape, the

local citizens demanded justice. “It blows the entire security and safety to hell,” was the one major outcry. It meant the government wasn’t doing its job. With all of the taxpayer’s money spent on the facility, security, armament, personnel, and support, the least an honest citizen could ask for was personal protection for their family.

“I’m such a lucky dog,” he muttered, still very appreciative of his cunningness, cleverness, and astuteness, resulting in the quickest snap decision he had ever made. The next step had just been as unplanned. His body was set free; his mind overflowed with ideas of endless prospects by a land devastated by waves of terrorist attacks on the brink of war. His mind sought out the next important need for survival: money, not only for himself, but money for creating a new future for the country, his country. Once freed and out in the open, when he saw the plight the people were in, his focus shifted from personal desires to that of national wellbeing. With communication rendered ineffective after the EMP strike and the establishment disintegrating, he took matters into his own hands. It was then that he met up with Brodie Elliott, Command Sergeant Major, 1st Armored Division, Badlands, Fort Knox, KY.

It only took a few days of forging friendship and to hammer out a plan. It wound up being the best plan ever devised for a government takeover. It had called for taking custody of the land’s tangible wealth, the millions of gold bars stored at Fort Knox. It would only work because he and Brodie used to be fighting buddies in the same squadron prior to his incarceration. Convincing Brodie to contribute to a government takeover took some doing since he was still a dedicated soldier following armed services orders and protocol. What finally convinced him was when no support from the garrison came to his aid to squelch the Leavenworth takeover. He quickly aligned with Norton once the glitter of national wealth weighed in his hands. It would directly fund the conquest and recruit new blood into the newly-created republic following the March of the Patriots staking out new borders.

What quickly transpired were new rules, enforced by Brooks and his War Dog squadron, a revised constitution sanctioned by the people, the abolishment of the old regime, political purges, acquisition of resources, enforcement of border lines, and economic recovery resultant in the industrial revival very much evident today. The new leadership, constitution, policies, and procedures, as strictly enforced by the present government, were embraced by the population with vigor, since it stabilized the new nation’s

internal economy as well as foreign policies. The rest of the world, with the exception of Islamic dominant nations, seemed to have stabilized after the newly printed dollar had been readily accepted by world brokers once more.

After the terrorist upheaval settled, things seemed to have quieted down to let economic growth take hold, when a new threat appeared on the horizon. It was a threat much larger with much bigger potential implications instigated not by man, but caused by nature. What made this threat worse was that there was no protection at all for the commercial sector and common citizens against the looming threat. Where the previous government administration had an insight into the potential damage caused by a major solar storm, as was looming, and consequently protected all of their government and military assets through EMP protection, costly but effective, the nation's economic and industrial wealth was highly vulnerable to such onslaught.

"The problem never ends," Norton grumbled, voicing his concerns to Elliott who had joined him at the emergency meeting General Foster had ordered. Similar to an all-out war, the resulting aftereffects from a solar or EMP strike had the same consequences. It would affect all sectors of industry ranging from emergency to health care and medical, law enforcement, National Guard, military, production, transportation by air, sea, land, supply lines, banking, finance, commerce, manufacturing, and many more. The ensuing economic setback could take months, years, or even decades to recover from. Where in the past recovery was expedited through sheer force of labor from the unfortunate, but very capable and pioneering, citizen, in today's life, dependent on modern technology and electronic circuit boards, it could take decades to recover. "We better come up with a solution, and quick."

FIVE PILLARS of ISLAM

“Dad,” Tracy asked. “Do you know anything about the Five Pillars? I’ve heard about it some place. Sounds like something out of the Koran.” Days had gone by since their last talk. Tracy was still bewildered and confused about Islam, more so after their last talk on Jihad and its doctrine, and had been trying to gain a new focus and purpose on her future. Meanwhile, Alex had spent more time than usual monitoring the ether and skies.

When Tracy walked into his domain, the underground Castle command room, he motioned her to a chair. “Be right with you.” He wanted to finish analyzing the printout on solar status and particles being hurled into the cosmos which had been compiled and recorded by the many sensors in the sky. “Just doesn’t make sense,” he muttered.

“What?” Tracy, though she appreciated her dad’s tenacity for technology and electronics, was more of an action person. She did not have patience when it came to research and analysis. She would rather fight it out first then ask questions later, if at all. It was a tactic she had acquired when she turned into Stinger, the combatant.

“Could science be wrong?” he muttered, staring at the data.

“Science’s never wrong,” she responded with a smirk on her face. She was making reference to the many unanswered speculations and assumptions posed by scientists in trying to solve cosmic events with mathematical equations for empirical proof. When it came to the universe, cosmic, and solar events, science was still fluid with speculations to try and understand the foundation of creation that made it all work for earthlings. With the limitation on man’s brain capability, we might never achieve a thorough understanding about creation. From the human being perspective, we may be guessing about the purpose of life forever and ever.

“I believe you jest?” It took him a second to realize she was being facetious. “Wait ‘til you get to be my age,” he suggested. “You’ll ponder over the same questions of life’s purpose like everybody else.”

She shook her head, saying, “Hardly. I’ll be too busy surfing waters off Hawaii and sipping Piña Colodas.”

He gave it some thought then chuckled. “I’ll be right along by your side. Now,” he turned serious, “what was your question again?” He put printouts and thoughts aside to pay her full attention.

“The Five Pillars,” she repeated.

“Ah yes,” he recollected, “the foundation of Islam. Let me tell you what I

know.” He paused to focus his thoughts on what he’d read from history books. To him, delving into the intrigue of faith, belief, and creation of life was a special treat, but only if it did not turn into an argument as was usually the case between believers. Here and now, he felt comfortable with the topic since it was a quest for information, rather than projected opinion.

“In contrast to science,” he began what would be another semi-monologue delivery, “the concepts, theories, and philosophies may hold the truth—empirical truth. Islam is no different from other primary religions practiced around the globe whether Christianity, Judaism, Buddhism, or Hinduism. All were recorded by man whether conceived through spiritual enlightenment, prophetic notion, or holy divinity. The differences are ritual, practice, and ceremony. But,” he explained, “in order to succeed, it takes strong leadership. It takes a strong leader, preferably prophetic, to form a congregation who is willing to blindly follow the inspired faith. But, as is the case with most major inceptions, it does not take much time before people start to quarrel. One course does not satisfy every soul under the sky. In the process, each branch is divided and subdivided with time, economic standing, progress, migration, and natural influence. Time and distance splits faith into subcategories modified by the people who consequently learn to accept and adopt.”

“Like Protestants, Baptists, Evangelists?”

“Precisely. Did you know that there are more than 4200 religions practiced on Earth?”

“You serious?”

“Dead serious.”

“I had no idea.”

“Most people don’t. What makes the Islamic faith different from all the others is its rigid principles. It is unique in conquest, method for expansion, and subjugation, not only in faith but territory as well.”

“What do you mean?” Tracy had learned the basic principles of the Islamic faith but, like the majority of the population, was not educated on its doctrine, ideology, and law.

“There are two major principles involved, that of the Pillars and that of Sharia. Both are based on strict adherences with indisputable obedience. Deviation, objection, and protesting are not allowed. Allah is the undisputable God. Mohammed is his chosen Prophet. Let’s take a brief look at the Pillars, the foundation of Islam.¹¹”

Considered compulsory for all believers, without exception, the Koran presents them as a framework for worship and a sign of commitment to the faith. They are Shahadah (creed), Salat (daily prayers), Zakah (almsgiving), Ramadan (fasting during), and Hajj (the pilgrimage to Mecca at least once in a lifetime).”

“Could you be more specific?”

“If you so desire.” He did not mind digging deeper into the stated topics for her to fully understand.

“Testimony (Creed)

The Shahadah is the basic creed of Islam that must be recited under oath with the specific statement: “I testify there are no deities other than God alone and I testify that Muhammad is the Messenger of God.” This testament is a foundation for all other beliefs and practices in Islam. Muslims must repeat the Shahadah in prayer, and non-Muslims wishing to convert to Islam are required to recite the creed.

“Ritual (Daily Prayers)

Ritual prayers must be performed five times a day. It is intended to focus the mind on God, and is seen as a personal communication with him that expresses gratitude and worship. While compulsory, it is also flexible in the specifics depending on circumstances. The prayers, preferably practiced at the mosque, are recited in the Arabic language, and consist of verses from the Koran.

A mosque is a place of worship for Muslims. The word mosque in English refers to all types of buildings dedicated to Islamic worship, although there is a distinction in Arabic between the smaller, privately-owned mosque and the larger, collective mosque. Though the primary purpose of the mosque is to serve as a place of prayer, it is also important to the Muslim community as a place to meet and study.

“Charity (Alms-giving)

It is required to give a fixed portion of accumulated wealth by those who can afford it to help the poor or needy, and also to assist the spread of Islam. It is considered a religious obligation (as opposed to voluntary charity) that the well-off owe to the needy because their wealth is seen as a trust from God's bounty.

“Gratitude (Fasting & Ramadan)

Fasting from food and drink (among other things) must be performed from dawn to dusk during the month of Ramadan. The fast is to encourage a feeling of nearness to God, and during it, Muslims should express their gratitude for and dependence on him, atone for their past sins, and think of the needy.

“Pilgrimage (Homage & Mecca)

The pilgrimage, during the Islamic month of Dhu al-Hijjah, (twelfth and final month in the Islamic calendar) takes place in the city of Mecca. Every able-bodied Muslim who can afford it must make the pilgrimage to Mecca at least once in his or her lifetime. Rituals include walking seven times around the Kaaba,¹² touching the black stone if possible, walking or running seven times between Mount Safa and Mount Marwah,¹³ and symbolically stoning the Devil in Mina.

“That’s the basics of the Five Pillars,” Alex said, gazing at Tracy expectantly. He was not quite sure if she was able to follow, especially the Arabian terminology. “So, what do you think? Does it make sense?”

“Dated, yes,” Tracy admitted, “but pretty basic values, understood and taken for granted by most faiths. What I don’t understand is the lack of flexibility. How does anyone, especially an all-knowing God, expect everybody, whether they’re a child, disabled, old, poor, or decrepit, to make the pilgrimage and then run? It doesn’t make sense.”

“The ancients did not have to explain specifics. The majority of souls alive were illiterates driven by fear.”

“Then, what’s all the fuss with the fighting, the hostilities, and the killings?”

“There is one more pillar,” Alex explained. “Pillar Six.”

“Never heard of it.” Shaking her head, Tracy tried to recollect.

“Neither has most of the world but you will,” he avowed. “It’s the code adopted by Jihad.” Though more obscure and embedded within the scriptures, it was the most important factor in the quest of the Islamic Jihad the world would come to know in the not-too-distant future.

MOJAVE DESERT

Gary Walters, General, U.S. AF, Mojave Desert, Edwards AFB, CA, was having another bad day. He could not remember the last time he had felt good about himself. It didn't matter that he held the top position as base commander at what he called the "godforsaken dustbowl in the middle of the desert." What bothered him most was the ever present daytime heat. He should have had no reason to complain for he was practically God here on this isolated airbase. There was only one slight consolation he had, glancing at the array of pictures spread across his office walls, a history of a rich and rewarding career. They were a reminder of a more glorious epoch. The scenes were from days of soaring high up, experimenting with new craft designs just released from nearby Skunk Works, ready for flight tests. "What days they were," he recalled, leaving a bittersweet taste in his mouth. His mind bounced back to reality when the phone rang.

"What?" he barked into the mouth piece.

The local base operator's voice sounded urgent. "Call from Vandenberg."

Contemplating a second, Walters hesitated about taking the call but decided to pick up anyway since there was no launch scheduled for the day. "I'll take it," he replied.

"Walters!" a booming voice sounded off. The caller was his counterpart from the space launch center, Lee Blackwell, full-bird colonel, Pacific Missile Launch Facility, Vandenberg AFB, CA. Hearing the familiar voice, he inwardly groaned in recognition.

"What now?" For Gary Walters, this meant either a favor or spelled trouble.

"Need a favor."

Can't be that bad, Walters surmised, giving the caller the chance. "Shoot."

"Gonna send somebody over for flight training," Blackwell said. "I want you to give her your full attention."

"Not another woman," Walters huffed. Women, he silently contemplated, don't need that. Having been born, educated, and trained by a career created within the establishment decades ago, he still had a difficult time adjusting to "special needs for the female," as directed by changes in times and policies. Not that he was a chauvinist. He was too smart to get into trouble that way. It was the sexual part he didn't like, especially when it came to giving orders. It was a subconscious thing, to always have to consider possible consequences, not for him, more so for his staff. Sexual harassment was something hard to

control in an environment created for men, and organized by men. Most times it was an unintentional slip initiated by suppressed hormones from living and working in the desert, an isolated environment. "Can't do it," he grumbled. "Don't need it."

"You'll like this one," Blackwell replied. "Former astronaut."

It occurred to Walters that there was only one astronaut remaining after the ISS incident and the budget cuts that followed. "Bauer? Liz Bauer?" he said, reacting somewhat incredible.

"The one and only."

"What's she want here?"

"Train her on the Lightning." What Blackwell referred to was the recently commissioned Lockheed Martin-built, multi-role, fifth generation F-35 strike fighter. Over budget, full of cost overruns and overpriced, it was a stealth craft built on the latest technology and weaponry. Superior in design and performance, it was a joint U.S. and British production of the world's most deadly aircraft. Less than one second passed before he accepted. "Send her over. I'll give her special attention."

"Sure you will." The line went dead. A sigh of relief escaped Walters' lips. It was a rare occasion to actually look forward to a new arrival. "It'll be a diversion," he hoped, "from staring at nothing but the desert landscape."

The base, strategically situated next to Rogers Dry Lake within the Mojave Desert, was on a deserted salt pan which provided a hard surface for takeoff and landings. The large landing area, combined with excellent year-round weather, made it a perfect site for flight testing. Not many visitors came here. It was only the occasional desert rat, discouraged from entering by the many warning signs surrounding the dry lakeshores. In the early days the place was buzzing with activity, including supersonic over-flights, which created tremendous shockwaves that broke up an otherwise silent wasteland. Today, with the country still emerging from the last disaster, by and large due to the lack of fuel, the base was mostly silent.

Many of the more valuable craft had been mothballed. Others, not as valuable, were left out in the open, exposed to the elements. Though partially preserved by the dryness of the region, the blowing sand was doing its job on the metal surface. Yet retired, still memorable, were the once proud birds for their achievements. Many were remnants from notables like Chuck Yeager, Lt. Col. Henry H. Arnold, and test pilot Glen Edwards, with record-breaking awards for speed, altitude, and the sound barrier from memorable craft such

as the Bell X-1, X-15, U-2, B-52, SR-71 Blackbird, and the space shuttle.

“Bring her in,” Walters ordered his assistant two days later when he was informed of the visitor. Though Gary Walters was not prone to jumping to his feet for visitors unless it was “Brass,” for the person entering his office he made allowances. Not only was she stunning in appearance but she carried herself much like a ranking officer, and he liked what he saw. “Please, please come in.” He ushered her into the room with an inviting gesture. “Have a seat. Looks like you recovered well,” he said, admiring her personage, “since the last time I saw you.” It was Blackwell and Walters flying the X-37¹⁴ top secret space plane in orbit for extended flights that had come to Liz’s rescue as the only survivor from the ill-fated ISS mission. Emaciated and at the brink of death, her appearance then was quite different. Today, he was facing what could best be described as a model or fashion rep.

“Yeah,” Liz admitted. “I was a mess the last time we came face to face. Don’t remember if I ever thanked you,” she said, extending her hand across the desk with a gracious smile.

“Glad to get you out of a jam. All part of the job.”

“You saved my life,” she insisted. She would be indebted to him for the rest of her days.

“Coffee, juice?” he offered the two essentials in the desert: coffee for keeping you awake from boredom and juice to keep the body from drying up.

“Juice will be fine.”

Handing her a bottle from the cooler, she said, “Thanks.”

“So,” he said, “how can I be of help?” Studying the shapely woman seated across the desk, he had to make a conscious effort to keep from staring at her but contemplated, I’ll have to get to know this woman. Walters was not prone to sentiment. Spending most of his career in this dustbowl, dishing out orders in between swearing and cussing about one mishap or another, had made him numb to personal feelings.

“Wait,” he stalled, checking his chronometer. “Up for lunch?” It was only 10:30 am and still early to be served at the O’ Club, but there was no better opportunity to get to know his visitor.

“Sure,” she said, smiling at him while getting off the chair. “I skipped breakfast this morning.” Using long strides, she followed him to the parking stall. Spotting the recognizable shaped duty vehicle assigned to the general, slightly startled she said, “My sister’s got one of these.”

“Humvee?” He shot her a surprised glance.

“Same model but customized.”

“Your sister,” he presumed. “By any chance Tracy Bauer?”

“The one.” Liz grinned at him as she got into the passenger seat.

“I heard about her,” he said. “Stinger, right? What’s she up to?”

“Same thing. Fighting off bad guys for Foster.”

“Deserves all the thanks she can get for all she did for the country. Need more people like her.”

“She had support. Patriots, remember?”

Ten minutes later they were seated in the comfortable environment of the club. Conversations between attending patrons were mostly hushed, as was the case in most disciplined military settings for the brass. There was no boisterous behavior as commonly displayed at enlisted men’s clubs. The place was a setting much like a romantic place, outside weekend family dinners. “Now,” Walters said after being seated and served drinks, “what is it you’re looking for?”

“I wanna fly the jet.”

He considered the request for some time, then said, “You fly?”

“Twin-engine Otter,” she answered with a shrug of her shoulders. “Firefighting.”

“I appreciate that but flying a jet is different,” he pointed out. “It takes a tough person.”

“You don’t think I’d qualify?”

He mulled for several seconds then admitted, “Guess you do after what you’ve been through, but I must warn you, jets are dangerous. They are killing machines. Training’s usually done for young recruits only.” Regardless of her prior skills, it was his duty to warn her about the perils of flying fly-by-wire craft. Though completely computerized and controlled by electronics, it still took a capable body and quick human mindset to make decisions for instant maneuvering. There were the g-forces, blackouts, and engine flameouts to consider and he stated so.

“I thought of all that,” Liz admitted. “I’m an astronaut. Don’t you think I deserve the consideration?”

“They are expensive craft,” he stalled, making one more attempt by pointing out reality. “But,” he finally surrendered, “if it’s what you want, I’ll get you signed up.”

“It’s what I want.”

“By the way,” he asked, checking her hand, “You attached?”

“You mean married? No, but I’ve got two kids.”

Walters took her response as a sign of possibilities. He developed a slight interest to get to know her better, if only as a friend. She is good looking, and smart, he admitted. Wouldn’t mind having her around socially. It’ll definitely advance my social status. Being senior to many officers on base, it was not often that he was invited to parties because of his gruffness. “Be at my office at oh eight hundred,” were his departing words after dropping her off at the officer’s quarters. He felt mellow, slightly inebriated, and elated as he drove off with Liz on his mind. It was the first time in decades he actually had something pleasant to look forward to other than sitting at home alone most times. He, like so many military career individuals, was a divorce casualty from too many duty assignments and rotation schedules. Getting married young was a social requirement that not always worked out for the young and naive wife-to-be. Where her ambition usually entailed creating a happy marriage and raising several children with expense carried and paid for by the government, for the husband, who may have had good intentions supporting all of her plans and decisions, most often did not work out as planned. Conditioned to follow orders when assigned, temporary or permanent, the separation, many times, split the family unison ending in divorce. Walters, after years of trying to hold his family together, eventually succumbed to such condition. He took it hard at the beginning, but eventually accepted the state as “product of military career.”

For now, his spirits, as rare as they were in this place of duty, had been lifted once more.

PILLAR SIX – JIHAD

Tracy slept in late. There was no urgency for getting up early. Besides, she hated alarm clocks. They were something she could not tolerate, and she was grateful she was not part of the general workforce living by the clock. Her tasks were primarily driven by spontaneity created by unforeseen events driven by terrorist attacks, political instability, and imminent threats. At this point in time in her life those were the only issues that captured her interest. It was also the source of her income and chosen lifestyle from covert, but sanctioned assassination missions from the government. She hated such a ferocious label, synonymous with unconscionable killings. She had feelings and sentiments like most people, sensitivity to living beings and things. Where she differed was the deeply-seated sense of justice. Where most illicit deeds could be resolved through legal litigation, the extreme cases, such as crimes against humanity, could not. It was those instances where she stepped up to the plate. When growing up and learning about some of the ruthlessness human nature was capable of, she'd vowed, "Somebody's got to stop it." It was inconceivable to her, imagining ever committing such a ferocious act as deliberately taking a life. Since then, she had grown up facing life's reality. Circumstances made her see the world as it was, brutal and unforgiving. It had shaped her mind. "Besides," justifying her actions, "there's not much of a difference between her and a soldier in battle." Both acted on orders. Besides, righteous people did not think twice for having a ruthless dictator eliminated from earth. They may have had honorable intentions at the beginning of their rulings, but somewhere along the path had turned mad.

"Dad," she called out. There was no answer. She knew where to find him. As usual, he was probably busy at his Command center, and she headed down the stairs.

"What's happening in the world?" Expecting a negative response regardless of daily news, it was her dad's nature to share his knowledge and news. This morning, he reacted different.

"Something's up," he muttered while studying the graphs held between strained hands.

"What?"

"I mean something's up," he emphasized while nodding at the monitors. She followed his gaze but only noticed data and graphs on the displays.

"Still puzzled with sunspots?" It was all that he had talked about lately. "You're obsessing." She was always concerned about his health. After all, he

wasn't a young warrior like her, though he once was.

He looked up, giving her his full attention. She took a few steps forward to beside him to peek at the print in his hands. "Give me that," she said. "You need a break." Tossing the paper aside, she said, "Come," pulling him along to the deck upstairs. "Beautiful day." She nodded in the direction of the Rockies. No matter what season, she knew the sight of the jutting peaks of the Rockies would calm his senses. It did hers. "You need some sun," she ordered. "Rays will do you good."

"Get plenty from computers and sensors," he responded, deep in thought about sunspots, solar flares, and neutron particles.

"Forget about it for once," she insisted. "You owe me an explanation."

"About what?"

"The hidden Pillar of Islam. Remember?"

"Ah, yes. The Sixth Pillar,¹⁵" he muttered.

Recalling their talk on Islam, he picked up his semi-monologue from days ago. After getting started, his words just kept flowing. She sensed that he wanted to get the 'talk' over with so he could hurry back to his domain, the place he felt most comfortable. "The sunspots can wait," she said.

"The Five Pillars of Islam, as already mentioned, are the declaration—Shahadah—that Allah is the only God and that Mohammed is his Prophet," Alex began, still somewhat hesitant to get sidetracked from his daily work. "The pilgrimage to Mecca, the daily prayers, the giving of alms, and the month long fasting from sun-up to sun-down during the month of Ramadan, yet the focus of attention of Islam's geography and role in international affairs has always been Jihad and its adaptation of the Sixth Pillar.

"In order to understand Jihad as a veritable sixth essential element in the spread of Islam historically and the threat it poses today, one must understand how Islam radically differs from other faiths and functions politically and geographically.

"For instance, in Medieval Spain, numerous theological debates were held to discuss the relative merits and claims of the three monotheistic religions, Christianity, Judaism, and Islam. Even though many centuries have passed, there is still a fundamental division among them. The Jews first discovered a path toward redemption and how to live in a just society according to God's commandments. They thereby believed they were setting an example by serving God as a nation and demonstrating their way of life to other nations. This continued to be possible even after the destruction of the Temple and

loss of Jewish independence in 70 AD.

“Christians, on the other hand, believed that this was possible on an individual level through the agency of God’s church and could be achieved by anyone no matter what his or her nationality, race, or sex.

“The radical interpretation of Islam that has become a threat to the traditional Western model of the state requires a continual appraisal of a chess-board like map of what part of the world has been subdued and placed under Muslim rule ‘forever.’ In this regard, territories such as Israel, Spain, Chechnya, Greece, Bulgaria, Kosovo, Armenia and even large regions in China, Ethiopia, and India were once under the sway of Muslim rulers and are therefore considered submitted to Allah. They cannot be allowed to return to the ‘Camp of War’ or Western society. You understand the importance,” Alex said.

“I’m getting to see the light,” she replied. “Who else would know any of it but a learned scholar?”

“A history buff like me,” Alex said, indicating a sense of accomplishment for being informed on not only technology but other subjects as well, then continued.

“Islam, literally meaning ‘submission,’ regarded as the ‘Camp of Believers’ who have already submitted to the will of Allah and Mohammed’s message, is measured on the political map to the extent it has prevailed over the other camp of non-believers, the infidels, the ‘Camp of War.’ More than a matter of personal submission to the will of Allah, subjugation of the Camp of War requires dominion over territory.

“Al-Qaradawi, a highly respected and popular Egyptian theologian who appears regularly on Al-Jazeera and is the founder of IslamOnline—a popular website offering opinions and religious edicts, is considered to be a favorite Islamic scholar of the extremist Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and an opponent of the Mubarak regime. He is also regarded as the most prominent spokesman for rejecting the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and democracy as inappropriate for Muslims to follow. He has supported Palestinian suicide bomb attacks against Israeli civilians and many other radical extremists’ attacks.”

“Who then are ‘moderate Muslims’ that want to live in harmony with their neighbors but have a theological sword hanging over their heads?” Tracy asked.

“It’s getting political here,” Alex replied, “if you have the stomach for it.”

“I can handle it.” Tracy, for all of her accomplishments in the name of state and government, tried to stay distant from political associations. It had never been her desire to get involved in taking that way through life. It was action, pure action, dictating her interests.

“There are two types,” Alex went on, “both of which seek to avoid ever having to explain their views to non-Muslims:

- a) Believers who are far from the centers of political power where Jihad has traditionally been viewed as a sixth pillar of Islam.
- b) Rulers whose security in office has depended on a close tactical alliance with non-Muslim nations and are themselves targets of the ‘Islamist’ movement everywhere. They are all walking on a tightrope. That’s it in a nutshell,” Alex stated, patiently waited for her to respond.

“Quite a nutshell I must say,” she said, trying to make some sense out of it all by relating the Islamic conviction with her own, being Catholic, then finally responded, “Not that much different.”

“You serious?” Alex could not suppress his surprise. He expected a much different response. “You’d better explain.”

“I’m talking about cultural convictions, ethnicities dating back millennia. The Catholics...”

“I know what you’re about to say,” Alex interrupted her. “The brutalities of the Crusaders, the Knights Templar, the inquisitions instilled on mankind during the Middle Ages and other eras with more ferocious acts reaching back to Biblical times, all fighting for their causes—justice—freedom?”

“Damn right. What about that?”

“That my dear,” he replied with an innate smugness, “is a session for another time. Let’s get a bite to eat. I got hungry talking.”

“And I am getting sick from all the confusion of faith, misguided principle, and tyrannical behavior of man.”

“You asked me, remember.”

“I’ll have a drink instead,” she said and promptly followed him inside.

“Whatever suits you,” Alex muttered, deciding on a drink himself. He had to calm his edgy nerves before getting back to his dungeon.

BALTIMORE DOCKS

Scott Brooks, after waiting in the darkness of night by the waterfront for another twenty minutes, decided it was time. Alert to newly initiated jihad activities infiltrating the shores, primarily entering on freighters calling on U.S. ports, he needed specific information. To obtain that, he would have to wring it directly from the source. Sources tonight were several. There were three befitting the bill waiting at the harbor motel to be quizzed. He checked the weapon tugged under his shirt for readiness. With magazine loaded, bullet chambered, knife tucked in one boot, and adrenaline pumping through his veins, he was ready. Not that he needed a weapon. He was trained in close combat. It was a backup in case of the unexpected. There had been times when he had been surprised by additional assailants. Under normal conditions, he was in complete control after mentally working out every detail of his plan, no matter how tactical or fluid it might turn out. With years of extremist fighting experience, there were not many surprises he would encounter. "We're ready," he muttered, patting the gun beneath the fabric, headed for the dimly illuminated hotel entrance.

It was not his first time entering hostile turf. There had been a number of occasions similar to tonight's mission. Headed for the reception desk he rang the bell. Several seconds later, sleepy eyed, the desk clerk appeared, proclaiming, "We're full. Didn't you see the sign?"

"I'm with three sailors checked in earlier but don't know the room number."

"Three eleven," he said, briefly glancing at the register.

"Thanks," Brooks returned, taking the stairs up several flights. Arriving at the room, after several knockings, the chatter inside turned silent. He could well imagine the reaction taking place on the other side of the door: alert, suspicion, guarded action. They would jump to their feet, taking up defensive positions with one cautiously approaching the door. Their senses were trained to be cautious. Brooks waited for the latch to be removed. The door unlocked and slightly opened before he made his move.

He kicked the door while forcing his way in, shouting, "Freeze." It was an attack call most criminals recognized but typically ignore. The reaction was always the same: taking flight, ducking behind furniture, pulling a weapon, poising for action. There was usually a second's hesitation before the shooting began. On the lawful side, the perpetrator had to exercise split second decision-making to not injure or kill the innocent. On the unlawful

side, killing an element of the law would mean incarceration for life. In most cases, the criminals only want to rush from the scene. On the combatant side, in this case Brooks, he used the split second to assess the situation. His eyes swept the room to take the layout, occupants, and weapons in use at a ready to either take flight or fight. He would not allow flight.

“Drop your weapons,” he shouted again, enforcing the situation.

Before the last word left his lips, Brooks had the immediate environment in control. There were the three he instantly recognized from his earlier surveillance dressed in under shorts. One had dove behind the bed, another had disappeared into the kitchen while the third rushed into the bathroom locking the door shut. Taking a step forward, his eyes caught a set of playing cards he was unfamiliar with, uneaten sandwiches with cookie crumbs messing up the table. His weapon sought out the sailor crouched by the kitchen sink, “Your choice,” Brooks commanded, clutching his leveled weapon. “Live or die.” The choice was made when he noticed the sailor’s index finger pull on the trigger. Brooks shot the steel from his hand protecting himself by ducking behind the entrance door to avoid getting hit. Next, he quickly sidestepped from getting shot by the sailor from behind the bed. His next action came by grabbing the man in the kitchen and forcefully threw him across the bed. The next bullet headed his way lodged into the flying body crashing on top of the shooter. Jumping after, Brooks disarmed the second sailor with a knockout punch in the face leaving one opponent in the bathroom to deal with. Aside from profuse breathing by the injured, the room had turned quiet for the moment.

Stepping close to the bathroom door, “Come out,” Brooks demanded. The answer came with several shots fired from the inside. “One more chance,” he shouted in the direction but did not wait for a response. At the same time he lifted his boot and kicked the door in with such force it tore from the hinges landing against the sailor’s body. Brooks seized the moment to disarm the stunned and confused sailor. While the full action played out like an action scene from a Hollywood movie, in actuality, it only took a few seconds to end. It was time to interrogate.

Tightlipped as expected, none of them were willing to talk or reveal information. Impatient as always, Brooks was not about to waste much time and had to make an example. The ruthless killer that he was, without qualms, in a reflex action unexpected by the injured, he placed one precisely aimed shot between the eyes of one radical. Catching the other’s reactions, he knew

it would loosen their tongues.

“You speak English,” he said. His gaze switched between the two remaining but only received a black stare. He knew at least two of them did since he had heard them speak English, though only broken dialect. He lifted his gun and trained it on the face closest ready to fire. Both of his captured instantly reacted by raising their hands to shield their faces pleading for mercy. Brooks slowly lowered the gun demanding, “You cooperate and I’ll let you live.” It was a promise one of them clearly understood and nodded in agreement. His companion followed suite after throwing an uncertain glance at his buddy, then also nodded. It gave Brooks an idea who to deal with from here on.

He directed his face on the one, “I ask. You answer. Understood?” Eager nodding of the head followed. He started the interrogation without further delays. “What are your mission orders?”

“Attack power infrastructure.”

“Location and time?”

“New York City power plants,” he replied in a wavering voice. “But don’t know when.” It seemed that once the rule of the interrogation was placed, Brooks’ subjects were willing to cooperate. If they did not provide the answers sought, he figured, they knew they would join their companion sprawled out on the floor, dead. Either way, if their mission commander got the wiser of any information leaks, their lives would be cut short. Brooks knew from dealing with terrorists for years, recruits were indoctrinated to fight and die in the name of Allah. He was also aware of the reasons.

Life in most Muslim communities was difficult from the time of birth. Living by the code of Islam, as directed by Mohammed, their savior, borne onto earth was considered only a temporary term, that of hell. Salvation was promised to each soul in the hereafter, the heavenly abode, but only after paying due penalty for being born. For Brooks, as was the case for many fellow citizens, living in a free world such as the New Republic, life was a virtue filled with unlimited pleasures of the living planet, the earth. His understanding was, “if a healthy mind could not identify and understand the precious gift bestowed on the living, the willing, subjugated by adverse religious pressures have no place on earth. Their only course of action was agitating and making life miserable for the others.

“What plants,” Brooks demanded, proceeding with the interrogation. “I want specifics.”

“All of them.”

The revelation slightly startled him. It was something he had not expected. It showed with his next orders, “Your command headquarters?”

“Do not know.”

“Your leader?”

“Do not know.”

“Your attack plan?”

“Await orders.”

“Local Cell?”

“Mosque Zero.”

It was a location Brooks was familiar with from past encounters with Islamic radicals not that long ago. Prodding his pointed gun at the sailor’s temple did not produce additional data. Through the willingness and openness of one, accompanied by nods from the other’s reactions, Brooks sensed that the captured spoke the truth. For the time being, he had to be content with the information received, as limited as it was. He suspected their plan called for infiltrating the shores and borders, compromising security, and damaging the nation’s aging infrastructure. Gathering more information would only be a waste of time. Not upholding his earlier promise, after firing two shots placed to each of their heads, Brooks left the room muttering, “Three less terrorists to deal with.” He felt no remorse.

After arriving back at his place, his next action was calling Alex.

“You got a timeline?” Alex wanted to know.

“Not yet,” Brooks stated. “But I suspect it’s soon.”

“Oh?”

“I’m spotting more and more foreign faces getting off ships. Suspect Jihad is behind it.”

“Thanks of the info. Keep in touch.”

MUSLIM IDEOLOGY

“Morning, Dad,” Tracy said in the quiet of the Castle. “What’re you doing? Got some time?” As usual, mornings when she joined him he was busy with monitoring the ether. Today was no exception. Ever since their last talk on Islam, something had been gnawing at her.

“Be with you in a minute,” he said. Pressed for time since Brook’s call, in tracing potential terrorist activities, he sensed his daughter’s urgency.

“Okay,” he said a minute later, turning to her. “What’s on your mind?”

“Something’s been bothering me,” she said. “I need to clarify. Maybe you could enlighten my concerns.”

He gave her full attention. “Shoot.”

“When on an assignment,” she began, “I don’t have time to identify, analyze, or separate the guilty from the innocent. Though I plan things out before the fighting starts, once into it, there’s no time to analyze and think. Everything that moves goes down.”

“I can imagine. Been there myself.” Alex had his share of confrontations in his past.

“I need a clear and precise picture to understand the potential enemy. I know there is Muslim the culture, Islam the religion, and Jihad the extremist faction. How do I identify their differences?”

“It’s not a simple one fits all, answer,” Alex said, shedding some light on her concerns. “Let me give you the definitions for a clearer picture. Maybe that will help.” He took several seconds for an answer, he knew she could accept. “The struggle begins within Islam itself, much like in Western religions. The original Christianity, as practiced by followers of Jesus, has separated, divided, and subdivided over the past two thousand years to suit and satisfy the various needs of many cultural differences. The root of it is driven by geographic distances, cultural changes, and regional adaptations to the environment. It’s what drives people to adopt or modify their beliefs. For instance,” he further explained, “the fighting you hear and see on the news is global and is always over religious dominance of one over the other. One time one side wins, the next the other. What makes Islam different and more cohesive is that most of their factions generally live in close proximity within each other. It’s because they don’t have a nation to claim as their own. While they believe in the same creator, Allah, and same prophet, Mohammed, many have their own Biblical interpretations of the Koran, namely the Sunni, the Shia, and the Sufis.

“You mean they are struggling for different causes?” Tracy was still puzzled.

“Same cause but different laws. First and foremost on their agenda is creating a land of their own, thus ISIL¹⁶ was claimed and staked out.”

“But that’s Iraq and Syria. You can’t just take a country away from its people. Always means trouble.”

“Did, has, and will. Look what’s happened as a result. Not a pretty picture, is it?”

“Tell me some specifics, Dad. I need a clear and precise picture.”

“Okay. Here is what’s really taking place. Do you want the short or the long version?” While the scriptures at times were not clear and precise for anyone to understand, he usually presented the most credible interpretation and general meaning.

“I’ll compromise,” she said with a sly smirk on her face. “Give me everything in one sentence.”

This momentarily startled him, but then he caught the gist of her tease. “Okay then,” he said. “Hear me out.”

“The largest denomination in Islamic faith is the Sunnis, which makes up 75 to 90% of all Muslims adhering to the Koran. The Koran and the Sunnah, the example of Mohammed’s life, as recorded in Hadith, his scriptures, are the primary foundations of Sunni doctrine. The Sunnah is seen as crucial to guiding interpretations of the Koran. Sunnis believe that the first four caliphs were the rightful successors to Mohammed. Since Allah, in Mohamed’s visions did not specify any particular leader to succeed him, leaders had to be elected through community voting.

“Okay. Go one.”

“In contrast to Sunni, Shia constitutes 10 to 20% of Islam and is its second largest branch. They believe in the political and religious leadership of Imams from the offspring of a certain Ali ibn Abi Talib, his righteous name, who Shias believe was the true successor after Mohammed. They believe that Ali ibn Abi Talib was the first Imam leader, rejecting the legitimacy of the previous Muslim caliphs. To most Shias, the Imam rules by right of divine appointment and holds absolute spiritual authority among Muslims, having final say in matters of doctrine and revelation. Although the Shias share many core practices with the Sunni, the two branches disagree, violently at times, over validity of specific collections of Hadith.

“I get it,” Tracy said.

“Sufism, on the other hand, is a mystical-ascetic approach to Islam that seeks to find divine love and knowledge through direct personal experience with Allah. By focusing on the more spiritual aspects of its religion, Sufis strive to obtain direct contact with Allah by making use of intuitive and emotional faculties that one must be trained to use. However, Sufism has been criticized by the others for what seems as an unjustified religious innovation. Many Sufi orders can be classified as either Sunni or Shia. The parallel can be drawn with Christianity and its many religious sects such as Catholicism, Protestantism, Baptism, Seventh Day Adventism, and many others. Where Christians have a free choice of religious beliefs, Muslims do too but to a limited extent.

“Now I get it.” She had a clearer picture but it still left the question. “How do you differentiate the good from potential evil, or right from wrong?”

“There is one simple principle. The Koran dictates certain practices one must follow. And believe me when I say, ‘they do hold Allah to his word.’”

“Such as?”

“Look for fundamental signs of the Jihad warrior. Dress code, head and foot gear, attire, and remember,” Alex emphasized, “the sworn Islam is committed not to shave.”

“The face?”

“Yes, the face. The Prophet Mohammed is believed to have had a beard and those who insist that devout Muslims grow beards emulate their Prophet's actions. Some Islam militants order men to grow their beards and trim their moustaches with, “Anyone found violating this law will face the consequences,” announcing the edict.

“But that’s profiling. It’s against the law.”

“Our laws—not theirs. There is no political correctness in Islamic order when it comes to slaughtering our people. In spite of all the legal rules and regulations, when it comes to dominance, people swear revenge to mass killings in many cultures. Keep that in mind when you are out there on hostile frontlines. It may keep you alive.”

“Thank you, Dad. I will.”

It would be their last talk for quite some time because events, as prophesized by Alex and executed by Jihad, would take over not only their lives but the country as a whole.

MOJAVE DESERT

Weeks had gone by since Liz arrived at Edwards AFB. Today was the day of her first training flight in a jet-powered plane. Though the Northrop-built T-38 Talon military trainer was not the ultimate in flying machines, it had to do for now. Seated at the end of the seemingly endless runway, squeezed into the tightly-fitted pilot seat, exhilarated for what was expected to come in only seconds, checking over the instruments while listening to tower chatter, Liz was elated. Here it is, her mind registered, my call sign.

“Lizard Three,” a voice resonated through her headset, “cleared for takeoff.”

Slightly apprehensive at being seated behind the controls of her dreams, she pushed the throttle forward to full power. There was a second’s delay before the thrusters picked up full speed. She released the brakes. What followed was a G-force similar to that she had experienced with a rocket launch. Her full weight was being pushed into the seat while taking almost vertically to the air. “Twelve thousand,” her instructor ordered, chasing her slightly below her exhaust trail. “Take it easy,” he cautioned as she took the craft into a tight barrel roll. “Acrobatics later.”

“Roger,” she responded but ignored his calls. Liz felt in her element. Soaring at the designated training altitude, she tested the craft to its fullest. Rolls, loops, and dives were the only things on her mind while she watched a kaleidoscope-like earth spin in her vision. With blue sky above, gray desert below, clear horizon ahead, the flight was over before she knew it.

“Back to base,” the instructor ordered twenty minutes later. As she touched down on the tarmac, his voice came through the headset. “Well done. You’re a natural. Check out at the flight desk.”

With an approving pat to her shoulder by the instructor, the out briefing went quick. Taking brisk strides, still dressed in her smart flight suit while removing the helmet, she headed for the locker room to change. “See you tomorrow,” the instructor called after her. Following a brief shower and after grooming her hair, Liz stepped into daylight once more. “I was watching you,” a voice said from the sidewalk. It was Gary Walters, gesturing at the Humvee, “Need a lift?”

“Sure,” she said, slightly surprised at him being here.

“How does it feel?”

A broad grin painted across her face, she said, “Can’t wait to get my hands on the Lightning.”

“Really? So soon?” He had had his fill of enthusiastic cadets in the past, but she surpassed them all. “Just take it easy,” he suggested in a fatherly tone of voice. “You’ll get your chance soon enough. Can I take you somewhere?”

“Back to quarters,” she said. She had things to do, like calling Dad, her Sis and the kids to tell them about her solo. Her pent-up emotions had come to a head, culminating into a feeling of euphoric heights. She wanted to dwell on it, uninterrupted by social issues. She sensed his disappointment, then offered, “Dinner tomorrow?”

“Great. I’ll pick you up at six.”

“Fine.”

Liz made her calls. Congratulating her on her flying ambitions, her various family members shared her success. “Just watch yourself,” were the general comments with hints of envy.

“Maybe someday,” Tracy suggested about her jet-flying desires.

“Too late for me,” Alex flustered.

“It’s never too late,” Liz replied, but silently hoped he would ignore her encouragement. Learning to fly jets was for the young. All in all, she felt elated. She had accomplished another segment in her life as a single mom. Without much of a chance for another space flight soon, due to one turmoil topped with another, flying a high performance craft was the next best thing to satisfy her ambitions. “At least,” she consoled herself, “I’ll be home for dinner after a flight.” That wasn’t the case with a trip into space as she’d found out. In hindsight, there were many amenities an astronaut had to sacrifice while on a space mission. Aside from that, there were the health factors, physical deterioration, and social implications. Without much privacy on top of gender consideration, a space traveler’s life took on drastic changes. “But,” she mulled, “they are only temporary measures. Future space exploration possibilities are endless.” In the not too distant future, she knew, there would come a time when technology and its advances would permit any and all aspects of human life to be carried into space. Children would be borne, the sick cured, and the aged would die and be buried in space. The lifecycle would continue, whether on earth, in space, beginning all over on a newly-settled planet. “We will become the extraterrestrials in the endless expanse of the universe.”

It was close to 1800 hours the following evening when the doorbell rang. As expected, Walters had arrived at her apartment on time for their dinner

date. Taking note of his appearance—well groomed, dressed in a casual but stylish outfit, Rolex glittering on his wrist—a date it is, she surmised. At least he's got class, she deduced, satisfied at his promptness and social consideration for the occasion.

“Whatcha got in mind?” Liz asked.

“Italian okay?” he replied with an anticipating shrug. There were a number of fine restaurants in nearby towns with Barstow, Palmdale, and Mojave to choose from.

“Italian's fine...” she hesitated.

He caught the cue. “Call me Gary.”

“Okay. Gary.”

The date turned out to be a pleasant one for both. There was much to tell by either side. Hers, Jihad battles with ill-fated plights in space. His, career line and earlier quest as test pilot. The evening ended with a kiss on the cheek from him and a promise for a next date by her. Though Gary was older by almost a generation and in spite of his general gruffness displayed when at work, his demeanor adapted well to the occasion with Liz wholly enjoying his company. She was even looking forward to their next get together.

FUTURE OF ISLAM

Tracy was in a hurry this morning. It was rather unusual that she was up this early. Alex checked the set of clocks mounted against the far wall for the time. Much like at NORAD and other command and control centers, in one glance he could view the correct time display from GMT to the twenty four datelines. The sun was not even up yet and Tracy looked like she was dressed to kill. What made this morning different was the way she was dressed, smart and combative, with a duffle bag slung over her shoulder weighing her down. "Where you headed?" Alex said, surprised at her unexpected appearance.

"Can't tell you, Dad. You are better off not knowing."

He was taken aback by her brisk response but also understood her motive for not compromising her destination and not putting anybody else at risk. She was about to head off on a mission. "Have some breakfast first," he offered.

"Don't have the time. Gotta catch a flight." The urgency reminded him of the days he used to be rushing off. Always on the go.

"At least," he stalled, "have some coffee."

"Okay," she said, checking her watch. There was still time.

"Coming up." He was already pouring a mug and serving her.

"Sorry to skip out like this Dad but I got the call this morning," she said. "Wish we could have talked some more."

"Any questions before you jump into adventure?" He would miss her and their sessions, not only the talks, but the sparring too.

"Got one for you."

"Just one?"

"You pretty much gave me an education on Islam and its cultures. But," she hesitated a moment, "where does it all end?"

There was deep concern painted across Alex's face. With his forehead furrowed he looked directly into her eyes to capture the very essence of her soul, then bluntly stated, "Islam will lose. So will the West."

It was such a profound statement it shook her up. It was something too unexpected to immediately comprehend. She had to hear his rationale. It might impact her very existence, especially when out on the frontlines fighting the enemy. "You mean," she said, shaking her head, "this is all for nothing?"

Alex had made his point and had to tell her what else was on his mind, but realized there was not enough time before her departure. What he had to say

might save her life, especially when confronted by extremists fighting for their causes while she was fighting for hers, and his, and the country. "I've got something for you," he said, then quickly headed for his den. Seconds later he returned with a document fastened in a binder. Handing it to her, he said, "You take it."

She glanced at the title page, stating in bold lettering, "Future of Islam," and asked, "What is it?"

"A draft I put together for the world. Take a look at it when you get a chance. It is to educate the people and alert the world," he explained. The document contained questions, concerns, and answers regarding the fundamentals of faiths, much like Tracy had but did not take the time to research the many libraries holding much of the ancient scriptures. In contrast, Alex, thanks to data mining, was able to compile a dissertation to satisfy not only his own curiosity on the direction Islam is taking but anybody interested in its future.

"Impressive," Tracy said, quickly rifling through the pages. "Don't you need it?"

"I've got it stored on the computer. I can print more copies."

"Thanks, Dad. I'll read it on the flight. Bye."

"When will you be back?"

"Couple of weeks," she promised before hurrying out the door without turning back. The taxi she had ordered was waiting in the driveway, where Alex watched her hop in and quickly disappear in the distance silently bidding, "Go with God." He lingered by the gate, saddened about her gone and the world for what was in store for all the people in the near and distant future. "So much fighting," he muttered into the sudden quiet. "When will it all end?" Turning back to retreat into the sanctity of the Castle, he answered his own question. "Never."

Cruising at thirty five thousand feet up, headed east, Tracy had settled comfortably in the back of the plane. The Fasten Seatbelt sign had just turned off with the familiar ping sound allowing passengers to move about. She briefly watched the customary aisle scene with some headed for the bathroom while others reached for the overhead compartment to fetch some personal belonging. Minutes later two attendants made their appearance with pushcart handing out small bags of crackers and beverages. "Where're you headed," the person seated next asked her. She shot a quick glance at the man to assess

his character, then said, “DC.” He seemed a pleasant young man eager to make connections. Like some travelers he seemed talkative, especially seated next to an attractive woman, “Government business?”

“You could call it such.”

“What kind?”

“Peacekeeping lobbying.”

“I’m for peace,” he said, eager to talk. “Tell me about it.”

“Listen,” she said in a polite tone of voice with a gesture at the folder in her hand, “I have work to do, if you don’t mind. Perhaps we can talk later.” She gave him a firm look. This way, she figured, she could concentrate and mull over the document Dad had handed her. She was anxious to read what was in the folder.

He responded with a nod but said nothing more. It ended their conversation. She slowly opened the folder in anticipation. “Future of Islam,”¹⁷ she read, mulling over the title page, then thought, what about the future of the New Republic? Guess I’ll find out. It was not surprising that Alex had information on hand of which most people had no inkling. What surprised her was him keeping it a secret, and she wondered what dark vaults of information he was able to access. But then, she figured, he had spent a lifetime working with the DOD with access to every Intel agency in the country. Much of the information came from the dungeons of the Pentagon, where, in collaboration with the general, both would benefit from the insurmountable data which had sat dormant for decades, and perhaps centuries. Reading on, it became clear that much of the folder included personal notations he had made throughout the document. It answered each and every question he had on the course of Islam, meant for every citizen of the free world to read. Tracy felt privileged to be the first reader. But then, she was his best advocate as well. She continued reading the semi-monologue Alex had prepared for the world.

“Islam is currently passing through one of its most dynamic times since its rise fourteen hundreds years ago. A dynamic period that started long before 9/11 as a struggle, mainly against the West, culminated into a policy resisting any nation or group that stood in its way. Many Muslims take this resurgence phase seriously and consider it as a decisive battle between Islam and the non-Islam, which Mohammed told and promised them. The West, largely in denial about this yet to culminate undercurrent, is rejecting its significance conflicts aimed at the world.

“Virtually unchallenged, Islam has survived and expanded during the last fourteen centuries. Where his efforts reflected on Mohammed’s failure to attract genuine followers, the few dozen who joined him were mainly friends and beneficiaries. Regardless of initial failure, Mohammed established his stronghold, namely Medina. After years of unsuccessful debating, Medina became insignificant and virtually non-existent. Since then, the only challenges Islam has ever had were military ones, with opposing forces more interested in militant conquests than in propagating Islam’s ideology.

“In the past, Islam has guarded its ideology by employing a thorough indoctrination program to its adherents. The deep seated beliefs and processes to Muslims are hidden from the outside world. Over the past fourteen centuries, Islam was never openly challenged or critiqued, because those who knew about its myths also knew what it meant to disclose them. Those who disobeyed could face repercussion and perhaps severe reprimands as directed by Mohammed.

“Even during the last few centuries, when the world started to open up to its age of enlightenment, Islamic authorities managed to seal the minds of Muslims toward any outside views about Islam. The tight seal on the Muslims’ minds continued to this day. Unwanted materials, whether printed or televised, are simply filtered out. For fourteen centuries, Muslims never had a chance to see their religion from any perspective other than their own. Islam survived mostly because it led an environment of censoring and one-way coaching without much tolerance to different views.

“Since the introduction of the Internet all that has changed. Thanks to the power of the Internet, the world is now open to almost everyone, and Muslims can have access to alternative views about Islam, something considered impossible in the past. The Internet is the first true challenge to Islam because it breaks through Islamic guarded systems. Most Internet followers do not recognize Islam’s demands of submission and total surrender of the mind questioning its reserved doctrines, but I know better. It is my sincere hope that time will prove me wrong on this prediction, but the signs are that the West is already losing.

“The decline of the West is an inherited problem that neither Islam nor any other external factors can be blamed for. But it is a disturbing observation that the West appears to be doomed with or without Islam, although Islam is taking advantage of the process and is working to speed it up. They are hoping to inherit the West without even having to fight for it.

For example, a few years ago, the now-passed Colonel Gaddafi proclaimed that Muslims could not take the world by force in the past, but now is capable without exerting force.

“Nations behave like individuals because they are made up of individuals. An individual’s performance is at its best in times of stress like preparing for exams or entering competitions. Nations too perform best in times of stress like wars or other national struggles. During the last war, the Western nations’ performance was at its peak. People took no chances; they went through some rough times, suffered hardships, fought wars and lost lives to secure a good future for their children and grandchildren. Those children and grandchildren are today’s Westerners who have reaped the fruits of their grandfathers’ hard work. Today’s Westerners enjoy freedom and democracy that they never earned but seem to be reluctant to defend. But that is rapidly changing.

“In recent times, the West has had some very painful experiences because of Islam, like the attacks on 9/11 and the bombings in Madrid, London, and Paris to mention only few. We all hate painful experiences, but it seems that pain is essential to the survival of individuals as well as nations. Pain is a caution signal warning people about a more serious underlying problem needing attention but ignored on many occasions.

“The bombing of Western targets all over the world during the last few decades should have been enough to motivate the West to take action about the root of the problem, in most cases identified as radical Islam. Instead, it seems, the West has opted to mostly ignore the problem. The Western societies seem to shut their eyes and surrender their minds against the looming threats from terrorists opening the gates for Islam dominance.

“Consequently, the West has been a safe haven for the radical Islamic organizations that are banned in their own Islamic countries. The Western social and political system facilitates some of the most notorious Islamic organizations, allowing them to survive, thrive and terrorize the complacent around the world. Recent remarks made by the head of the Anglican Church about introducing Sharia law are just another reminder that the problem is largely a self-inflicted one. The response of the people to their problems is disappointing to say the least. Those who recognize the threat on the free world leave and immigrate to a safer place, while the rest turn a blind eye and live in denial.”

“Wow,” Tracy said exhaling deeply. It alerted her travel companion who

had been patiently waiting for her to finish reading.

“Problem?” He seemed genuinely interested. Though she liked his demeanor, she was in no mood for getting personal. Not after reading and digesting the information Alex had laid on her. She had no idea how much time had passed when a ping echoed through the cabin alerting passengers to return to their seats. Tracy could read the dismay in his face with the flight ending shortly. After the plane had landed, her and her travel companion readied for parting, but not before him handing her his business card beckoning, “Give me a call, please. By the way,” he pressed on, optimistically smiling, “The name is Craig. Craig Cummings.”

“So I see,” she replied, glancing at the card while shaking his extended hand. “Tracy Bauer.” Collecting her overnight bag, she was in a rush and with a final “Bye,” at him, unaware of his lingered gaze watching her headed for the exit ramp.

PART TWO NATIONAL EFFECTS

PALM JUMEIRAH

Hasan Hammad, also known to the world as the Serpent, after recovering from multiple wounds inflicted by Stinger, followed with certain death, his final curtain call, was given a second chance. “Insha Allah (God willing),” he muttered, and “Allahu Akbar (God it great),” giving praise almost daily for the creator allowing him an extension on life. For all practical purposes he should have expired, drowned to be more specific, at the shores of the Straits of Hormuz. It would have been easy for him to leave life in the pinnacle of glory as was expected from the Jihad warrior with taking in posthumous fame, but not him. He loved life on Earth too much. He was in no hurry to meet up with other battle casualties in Islamic Heaven. “Virgins can wait,” he thought about Mohammed’s alluring proposition made back in the year 670 AD, Islam’s glorious inception. But, for now, having grown cautious after his near fatality, he decided to remain in the background sphere of operation. As far as the world was concerned, he had been declared dead.

While he had elected himself the new Prophet for his people, the Muslims and causes of Islam called upon by Allah himself, to be vulnerable to death had brought on a revelation he had not expected. It had never occurred to him that he would be vulnerable to life’s terminal phases. It had seemed that the creator had protected him from such earthly constraints. As far as the world was concerned, that revelation had been kept a secret, sworn on the cover of the Koran by both him and Yusuf never to reveal to anyone. As far as Stinger was concerned, he had perished with their last encounter, during the battle over world dominance. He wanted to keep it that way. It would be better for his next battle. It would be the greatest battle the world had ever seen. But getting there would take time to plan and time to execute. From his latest estimates, it could take from two to three years of preparation. As always, time was on his side. After millennia of living in oppression, hardship, and suffering, he mulled, “What’s a couple more years?” It was enough consolation for him to not to repeat mistakes he had dealt with in recent times.

“Yusuf,” he called to gain his trusted commander’s attention. “Join me.” He led the way to his favorite spot at his lofty abode.

Sitting in the quiet for some time, letting the cooling sea breeze from the Straits take effect on their bodies and minds, Yusuf, though disabled and still

convalescing from his last encounter with Stinger, felt that he was ready for whatever the leader had in mind for him and the future. “Yes?” He was not in a hurry either. The blow that had been dealt to both of them left some deep scars on their consciousness which they had yet to overcome.

“What do you think of me?” Hammad finally broke the silence.

“Why do you ask?” Yusuf seemed perplexed at the question. It might have been the first time, ever, that the leader had asked anything personal of him. The extent of their discussions used to be limited to either remarks or issuing orders.

“I will tell you why.” Again, more time passed in silence embracing the serenity. Yusuf’s mind seemed forlorn and lost in the distant horizon. The horizon blended in perfectly with the blue of the ocean with the sky cloudless as usual. He could still envision the fury from above and from below unleashed on them not that long ago. “I want you to take over the next phase of my operation.”

Yusuf, though startled by the revelation, was well aware of the leader’s initial plan. He had it memorized from beginning to end. It was a master plan not many minds were capable of conceiving. Who else but a true genius could devise a plan for shaking up the world, not only once, but over and over? Given, there were unprecedented setbacks. But, as was the case with all major undertakings, they had been calculated risks. Neither one felt apologetic or remorseful about it. It was what it was, a stated fact. Nothing more needed to be said. “Yes?” He was mulling over what the revised Plan would look like. He had no clue.

“I am turning command over to you,” Hammad unceremoniously stated. “You will regain control over the infidel’s territory.”

“What?” He thought he hadn’t heard right. What was just mentioned was the only spot on earth he vowed never to set foot on again. One defeat would have been enough, “but several, unthinkable.” He felt like a beaten dog being punished over and over for forgotten times.

“You will force the next push on the Great Lakes.” They were a body of fresh water deprived nations could not sustain without in the future.

“Why me?”

“You know the American continent and its people with their infernal customs best.” Hammad let the announcement of his monumental decision sink in. “Besides,” he explained, “I need to concentrate on something much bigger.”

“But,” Yusuf protested, “I thought we were settled on the American issue. What makes you think we will succeed this time? Besides,” he rationalized. “I want to be part of the next conquest.”

“I will tell you.” Hammad still did not know himself if his approach was going to work. It would be something novel beyond belief. “I have devised something that cannot fail. It is a plan so devious no one will suspect anything is wrong until it is too late, at which time our forces will move in to breach the shores before taking over the continents.”

The words had a twofold affect on Yusuf. It shook him up to the very core of his existence but also magnified suppressed aspirations toward achieving something he thought he would never have an opportunity to fulfill. He could not help but marvel at the trust his leader bestowed upon him. “You sure the Plan will succeed?”

“I have no doubts. Besides,” he stressed, “I will lend you my full support. You will take command on location. I will manage from here under my authority. It cannot miss.”

“What do I need to commence?”

“Here,” Hammad said, handing over a folder containing the newly-printed document, “is the beginning of a new age. One that will be forever written into history.” Their session had adjourned. Handling what he perceived a scripture of equal value to the Koran, Yusuf, glancing over the volume’s brief, realized that there was much work to be done. He gratefully retreated into the guestroom Hammad had assigned to him, gloating over the future opportunities extended him.

CASTLE ROCK

“What the hell?” Alex was shaken from his sleep. It was a sound that he had not heard since the recent battle with Jihad. His subconscious senses had triggered the alert. It was the sound of the power generator kicking in. Flipping the light switch did not give him an inclination. He bolted from the bed and headed straight for the utility room below ground level. It confirmed his suspicions. The generators had taken over Castle power supplies. Everything functioned as it should. The only question remained, “What caused it?”

“What gives?” Rhonda asked, sidling up. She was home with Alex for another weekend and awoke when Alex jumped out of bed. “Anything wrong?”

“Nothing’s wrong,” he said in a whisper. “That’s what’s wrong.” Checking the gauges and instruments confirmed his concerns. “The power grid is down.” It was not the first time that had happened. But since the rebuilding of the economy was going strong, the outage was unexpected. Another thought occurred to him. He rushed upstairs, headed directly to the Command center and exclaimed, “I’ll be damned.”

“What?” Rhonda said, somewhat perturbed at the irrational behavior from her usually calm and calculated partner.

“Communication’s down too. And satellites.”

“You think...?” Rhonda gasped, realizing the urgency.

“Nah. Couldn’t be.” They were thinking the same. The last time this had occurred was still vividly on their minds. Not so long ago, it was the very reason the country was brought to its knees, followed by an economic Armageddon they had not previously seen. But that was back then. The cause then was jihadists, led by none other than the Serpent, Hasan Hammad.

“He’s dead,” Rhonda reminded them. “Remember?” As incredible as it sounded, there was no chance for a repeat. Not with the Jihad leader perished.

Alex was already busy with analysis. He went from sensor to sensor recycling the equipment. There was no change. All inputs from the data sources had quit. The ether was silent and so were the satellites. “You go make breakfast,” he suggested. “No need for both of us staying here. May take some time. I’ll be up later.”

“Alright then.” Rhonda left the room.

Alex was alone. Now he could concentrate on the issues at hand without getting interrupted. “Okay,” he muttered, “let’s see what’s going on.” With

all equipment testing operative, he could program in search patterns to the software. It would allow him to ping the ether at programmed intervals covering the spectrums looking for responses from space-based satellite sensory equipment. Similar to submarine generated sonar signals whatever was operative would respond to the ping. While waiting for returns from space, Alex collected the printouts the sensors had reported just prior to the outage. “Can’t believe it,” he muttered, shaking his head. There it was again, staring him in the face: data discrepancies between actual solar readings from GOES-15 and historical data recorded in databases. “Something’s up,” he concluded just as power came alive again, with the generators shutting down to trickle charge mode.

Puzzled once again, shaking his head, he followed the aroma inviting him upstairs. Coffee and breakfast was waiting.

“Anything?” Rhonda asked curiously when he entered the kitchen.

“Nothing,” he said.

“Could be the solar storm,” she suggested.

He quietly shook his head. “Something else is going on I haven’t figured out yet.”

“Here,” she said, putting a breakfast plate in front of him. “Enjoy. Space can wait.”

Alex sat quietly in thought while enjoying a breakfast brimming with eggs, bacon, hash browns, muffins, his all-time favorite meal of the day. He savored it with every bite. It was a treat for him to be served. When alone, he seldom bothered with fixing his own breakfast. It was just coffee followed by a late lunch, usually a simple sandwich, and light dinner later in the evening. For now, with his present company, he completely enjoyed life forgetting for the moment what was awaiting them. “Delicious,” he approved with a smile while his thoughts drifted to the Van Allen belt.¹⁸

With breakfast finished and dishes put away, “So,” Rhonda wondered. “What’s next? Still puzzled over the outage?”

“You bet. You know intuitive me. It’ll gnaw at me until I have the answer.”

“I know. What do you think is going on? Tell me about the threat and what you think we should do.

“Van Allen belt.”

“What about it?” Rhonda, working space asset management, was familiar with the shield protecting earth from solar flares but not to the geological

extent as Alex. Though Alex could be quite exhaustive, she did not object to hearing more.

“It’s basically a charged radiation particles shield spread around the globe, held in place by Earth’s magnetism. It’s what keeps us from getting burnt by the sun.”

“Unless you enjoy getting tanned on the beach,” she volunteered.

“Something like that.”

“How’s it affecting the power grid?”

“Neutron particles from solar and cosmic sources slam into Earth’s outer and inner belts, taking out electronics and sensitive equipment such as satellites, Hubble telescope, ISS, space flights, and sensors not hardened with protective shielding.”

“EMP?”

“Yes, EMP,” Alex confirmed.

“Here we go again,” she complained. “It’s as if we haven’t already had our share of assaults for one lifetime. So,” she said, probing further. “What’s the concern?”

“The data does not match up. Doesn’t make sense.”

“How so?”

“My equipment indicates induced interference from some other sources.”

“Why not let NASA deal with it?” Affiliated with the agency in the past, Rhonda was quite familiar with their capabilities. She could not quite come to terms with why Alex was so fixated on satellites and sensory equipment, which was NASA’s responsibility.

“You don’t understand,” he claimed. “It’s like with the NSA, they don’t share information.”

“That’s not true,” she defended her former employer. “We shared.”

“Yeah,” he agreed, “but only what they want us to know. Everything else is kept a secret.”

“I think you’re wrong.”

“Let’s not quarrel.” All he would say further was, “Let’s wait and see.” It ended the breakfast session. While Rhonda went on a hike into the foothills, Alex headed back to his domain, the place he understood best. “Women,” he muttered in the quiet. “Always know better.” It was an empty expression but it served his way of maintaining harmony between Rhonda and him. He tried to avoid confrontations as much as possible because from experience, they usually wound up in arguments nobody would win. It was his rationale for

keeping peace.

Now, back at the Control center, the earlier outage still left him puzzled. “Coincidence?” he questioned without hesitation. “Not very likely.” With the power grid being vulnerable due to an aging infrastructure, foremost on his mind was the means of protecting it, if nothing was done to prevent an eventual collapse. With this in mind, he kept digging deeper into data analysis relevant to the power grid. Then, a thought occurred to him: Foster. “Gotta check with him,” he muttered, placing the call.

NSA HQ

Jack Warner, Chief of Operations, NSA HQ, Fort Meade, MD, had just finished reading the morning brief prepared by his staff when the secure phone rang. “Warner,” he barked into the receiver after the fourth ring. He was never in a hurry to pick up anymore. In the age of mobile phones, to him the office line had become more of a nuisance than anything else. Most times he tried to ignore it but this morning he made an exception, especially with the earlier power outage. When he arrived at the office, backup generators had already kicked in, feeding electricity to emergency lighting and office equipment. Since there were no alerts initiated on the news wires, he shrugged it off as one of the frequently occurring brownouts in recent months. It did not matter much as long as he could read his mail and live Internet feeds from CNN, FOX, and Al Jazeera, his favorite media channels.

“Hear you’re back in business,” Tracy said. She still wondered how quick the agency was reinstated by the new congress.

“Bauer? Tracy Bauer,” he yelled into the handset, taken by surprise. “Where in hell have you been? I’ve been wondering whatever happened to you.”

“You know,” she replied. “I got crushed like everybody else with Jihad taking everything down, including the company.”

“I know,” he sadly admitted. “I couldn’t get to the office if I’d tried.” He was referring to the economic collapse a few years back after the terrorist invasion. “Listen,” he said, trying to make amends. “You available? Sure could use you. Need a good organizer around here.”

Tracy had her reservations at the offer. She thought that he would be taken aback by her not checking in with him earlier. “You know,” she haltingly replied. “Lots of water has passed under the bridge since.”

“What have you been up to anyway?” In spite of how much time had passed, he sounded genuinely sincere.

“Ever hear of Stinger?” She must have dropped a bombshell on him since the line went silent. She could almost hear his brain grinding away but knew it was only line static.

“You!?”

“In the flesh.”

“I’ll be damned. Double damned,” he shouted into the phone. “Listen,” almost yelling at her, “You get your ass in here and make it quick. I sure could use you.”

“I’ll think about it but can’t promise anything.”

“I won’t take no for an answer,” he yelled. “You hear?”

“We’ll see. Bye.” She hung up. She could imagine him yelling more admirations, insults, and swearing after her. Regardless of her decision, she did not object to a possible collaboration with the agency when on future assignments. It would provide added security to her operation.

Warner did not bother to put the phone back on the cradle before he dialed a secure number. The person on the distant end picked up after the first ring, demanding, “State your business.”

“Listen,” Jack announced in an elevated state of gruffness. “I’ve got some news you won’t believe.”

“If it’s classified,” the voice insisted, “shoot me a coded text.”

“Got it,” Warner agreed, then hung up. Although he was put off by the initial rejection, he knew how critical security had become with the whole world watching with its most sensitive listening devices. He should know. He got first choice from DARPA when another spy gadget or weapon made its appearance. Most people had no idea how critical surveillance had become with the constant threat from hostile countries and extreme terrorist factions pressing on nations and the population alike. Where the world used to be busy with mundane things like exploring new territories, raising families, cultivating the soil, hunting for survival, and carving out a meager living, today, where technology was driving everybody and everything, life had taken a turn many could not cope or catch up with. “Poor slobs,” he muttered while briefly thinking on the past.

What he referred to was the innocents, the inventors, and the scientists mostly, as well as the population in general, the ones without any inkling of what really went on under the cloak of national security. It was a world only he and his closest staff were privy to. “Everybody else,” he mused, “is a Wuss.”

CIA HQ

Harry Carter, Chief of Operations, CIA HQ, Langley, VA, was brimming with bliss. He had every right to do so after having been without a job and an office, and no career for many months. After the terrorist attack, it appeared that it was the end of the once most prestigious organization in the world. The CIA had been around for sixty plus years when the unthinkable happened, the collapse of the United States of America, and with it every conceivable infrastructure from power to communication, affecting the basic survival of its citizens. Once the power grid was gone, nothing was functional, not even simple communication, the lifeline of his directorate. "Whole damned structure fell apart and with it field agents, embassy connections, and worse yet," he grunted, "my best trained ops teams disappear." He could feel a deep-seated fury well up again from the bowels of his gut with his career at stake, the powerhouse of his very existence. Watching his current staff, as sparse as it had become, keep busy from his spacious office window, he released a sigh of pent-up frustrations, glad to be back in the saddle again.

He was about to check the inbox, as proliferating as it had become in recent weeks, when the department manager stuck her head through the door. "Know anybody named Brooks?" Since she was a new hire, she did not know much about his former staff, organization, or operating mode.

"What?" he shouted at her. "Where is he?"

"Lobby," she said, then quickly retreated. It was all Carter had to hear before he bolted through the door in the direction of the elevator. "If it's true, if it is him," he beamed with unequal anticipation, "he'll need an escort in." Impatiently pacing back and forth in the confined space of the elevator, he could hardly wait for the doors to slide open. He spotted the familiar face. "Brooks!" he yelled in the direction of the visitor, reaching out "I thought you were dead."

"No such thing," Brooks responded with a broad grin. "Been meaning to check in on you once I heard you were back in operation."

"Where the hell have you been? How long has it been?"

"More than three years. Was in the Canadian wilderness for a couple of years, then got sucked up in the Jihad conflict. Tried to make contact a number of times with you but finally gave up when I realized all communication was down."

"It's the very reason the office shut down," Carter explained. "Couldn't raise any of you guys. Up for lunch?" He was too excited to say much else at

the moment.

It was an invitation Brooks would not turn down. "Lead on."

Though it was early yet, they headed for the food court. Aside the kitchen staff, busy with lunch preparations, the place was empty. "Drink?"

"Suites me," Brooks said with a shrug, while his host carted a couple of bottled from the vending machine. He was not prone to drinking during daytime but made an exception today. There was a lot of catching up to do. A couple of drinks would help him relax and fuel the conversation about to commence. It was not so much a conversation that followed. It was more like reporting in after a long absence from the agency.

Comfortably seated, Carter asked, "Where's everybody from your team?" The last time anybody checked in from the killer squad, as he usually called the team, was right after the EMP hit. When everything turned silent it was anybody's guess as to what had happened to his field agents. Since nobody made it back, he had always wondered.

"DELTA?" Brooks said. "Been fighting the enemy."

"Under who's command?" It was a revelation Carter had not expected.

"Pentagon," he replied. "Foster's directorate."

"That fink," Carter acknowledged, fuming from every crevice of his body, "should have known he'd pull something like that." What had puzzled him most was that none of his former operatives had reported in. "We'll see about that."

"Not much you can do about it."

"Oh? Don't underestimate the power of the CIA."

"You had your glory days," Brooks respectfully acknowledged his former boss who, aside from the President, once was the most powerful head of all agencies.

"You think so?"

"Well," Brooks proposed, vying him square on. "Just look at yourself." To him, it did not matter who or what agency he worked for. What mattered most was challenging assignments the general provided.

"What have you been doing?"

"CONUS work. Eastern seaboard mostly."

"You the ones that drove the buzzards from the shores?"

"My team," Brooks said. "War Dogs. Probably heard about it?"

"Damned right I did. I suspected you had something to do with it since it was a ruthless operation from what I have heard. No prisoners taken. How

about the Mississippi shores? Also your doing?”

“It’s how I got started. Locking the borders tight. Nobody left. Nobody crossed into the Badlands.”

“What are you doing now?”

“Sea Dogs. Attached to the naval fleet—subsurface operations.”

“Sure could use you. Any chance you’d come back?”

“Depends on the offer.” It was not so much for the money as it was missions. “My guys need the action. They don’t fit in with society. The whole lot’s gone whacko. Gotta keep ‘em busy, otherwise they’re too much for anybody to handle. Even for you.”

“Don’t underestimate my powers,” Carter pressed on saying, “I hear you. Always been the tough guy. Hard hitting, merciless, unforgiving.”

“Got that right.”

Warner’s mobile was chirping at him. He checked the caller ID, finished his drink, and turned all professional. “Let me have your contact,” he beckoned. “Give me a call.”

“Will do. Thanks for the treat,” Brooks complied by handing him his calling card while watching his former boss rush off. Time had flown by so quick neither had taken a bite to eat.

“Hope to see you,” Carter said, his voice waning. Carter headed back to his office upstairs with Brooks heading off to his next assignment.

It was back at the office when he took the time to look at the business card from Brooks. One eyebrow raised, the card read, “Independent Contractor – At Your Services,” followed by a contact number. It brought back vivid memories to Carter as he silently vowed, “Fight’s not over yet,” with reference to his career, rather than threats from potential enemies.

PENTAGON

“Hank,” Alex announced himself when Foster picked up the phone. “Got a minute?” There was a brief pause. Alex knew exactly what went through the general’s mind: Oh no...not another issue...need an excuse quick. What the hell, I can always cut him short.

Instead he heard, “Make it quick. I’ve got a meeting in ten minutes.”

“It won’t take long,” Alex promised.

“Shoot.”

“I hate to keep harping on this issue,” he blatantly started, “but were you guys affected by this morning’s outage?”

“Power?”

“That one,” Alex confirmed. “Need confirmation from your end so I know where to direct my focus.”

“No outage here. Only affected the eastern sector: New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Connecticut, Massachusetts, and New Hampshire. You know,” he stated, “Eastern Seaboard only.”

“It means,” Alex said, “only Eastern Interconnections took the hit.”

“That’s right. Haven’t heard about the other grids gone down.”

“Thanks, buddy. That’s all I needed from you.”

“Keep in touch.”

“Right.” Alex could hear his buddy breathe a sigh of relief just before hanging up. He was satisfied. He could concentrate on the eastern sector, the Eastern Interconnect. His mind was already churning with potentials and probabilities while he headed below.

This morning, his technology domain was quiet aside from the steady hum of dozens of electronic equipment mounted neatly on racks positioned against the walls. He pulled up the internal search engine for database parameters, then entered “American power grid.” It took less than a second for it to paint across the screen. As usual, it was the data mining application feeding him the results. It was a tool of all tools with global information ready at his fingertips.

Already decades in the past, Alex learned quite a bit about what drove modern society at its core. From the technical perspective it was mostly power generators, its long-haul distributions, and usage by the industries. But with the ever-growing demand crated by the population, the grid was expanding in ever greater spheres at a speed too complex for most to keep up with. Reading on, he realized just how complicated and difficult the system

had become. There was too much to digest in one session. He had to concentrate on only one aspect, integrations and upgrades to the system without a thorough idea of how much technology had been added into the original and dated infrastructure. “Grossly outdated” he muttered, shaking the head realizing its conditions, putting it kindly.

“Looks more like a behemoth, a relic monster, to be more precise,” he finally admitted over the humming sound of equipment. Frustrated as Alex was, he felt he had to share his thoughts with someone. “Tracy,” he called on the intercom, “I need you down here.” Several minutes went by before his daughter showed up. She had returned the day before from one of her ambiguity trips. While he was highly concerned for her safety during her periodic disappearances, he surmised it was either Foster or one of a dozen Intel agencies calling on her. She was tightlipped about it and he did not prod her about what he suspected was a clandestine mission. He was always glad when he heard the entrance door slam, indicating she had returned safely.

“What’s up?” Dressed in casuals, she was about to depart for town. “I’m going shopping.”

“Can it wait?” he asked. “I need you to listen to this.”

“Okay. I’m listening.” Tracy, after just returning from the field, felt she needed some time off. She was conditioned, though, for “spare of the moment orders” from whomever or whatever agency needed her service. Service, “if you could call it that,” was the necessary cover she required. To her, it was more like being outsourced for her deeds. Where the CIA and NSA had their action teams, the DOD had theirs, though somewhat different in nature. She, at most times, was the lone operative in the field contracted from organizations like the DCA, DIA, military Intel, and others, and had no complaints. She liked it this way. She was a loner irrespective of size and job.

“You with me?” Alex had noticed her mind drifting. He needed her full attention for what he had to relay.

“Go. I’m with you.”

“For once,” Alex directed her, “put on your analysis hat. I need you to have a clear picture not only of the interconnecting grid zones, but of regional connectivity and power feeds as well.”

“Why the specifics?”

“Because,” he stressed, “you’ll have to identify weak points vulnerable to a breach.”

“Got it.”

“It’s very simple as long as you understand the basic elements within the aging infrastructure.” From what Alex explained, technology had been expanded in recent years to make the grid more efficient. “What is still lacking is protection.”

“I get it,” Tracy acknowledged, “uncontrolled growth in industry sectors.” Technology from user demand, it seemed to her, was changing so fast that industries were only able to react to the demands, rather than being proactive.

A wide area synchronous grid or Interconnection,¹⁹ as she understood, “was a group of distribution areas operating in synchronization so that current fluctuation could be balanced out. This allowed transmission of AC power throughout the area, connecting a large number of electric generators to consumers enabling more efficient electricity to markets with assurance of reliable redundancy. Without it, a large failure in one part of the grid, unless quickly compensated for, could cause current to re-route itself and flow from the remaining generators to consumers over transmission lines of insufficient capacity, causing overload failure resulting in power shutdown or worse, generator burnout.”

“You sure?” Alex was not quite convinced. He was only too aware of people sometimes paying lip service to shut him up.

“Sure, I’m sure.”

“Okay. No need to get offended.”

“I’m not. Go on.” She sensed that Alex was not quite convinced about her grid delivery. Where she knew the general grid layout and its primary functions, “deliver electricity to home and businesses,” the underlying technology was still a puzzle to her.

“There’s one important element,” he pressed on. “One downside to a widely-connected grid is the possibility of cascading failure into a widespread power outage.” A central authority was usually designated to facilitate communication and develop protocols to maintain a stable grid. “What you need to do,” Alex instructed her, “look for tempered with sections. Look for intrusions.” Despite the novel design and efficient network functions of the automated electrical grid, its power delivery infrastructure suffered from aging across the entire U.S.

From a technology perspective, four contributing factors to the current state of the electric grid and its consequences included: aging power equipment, obsolete system layout, outdated engineering, and old cultural values such as planning, engineering, and system operation using concepts

and procedures that worked well in a vertically-integrated industry but not in the current horizontally interconnected power feed.

“That,” Tracy said, “covers the grid. What about the equipment, the gears, the parts?”

“I’ll come to that. Look for rusty segments, wire repairs, and anything that you find unusual.”

“Such as?”

“Parts, bits, and pieces that don’t belong like connections, boxes, and transmit wires,” he suggested. “You’ll have layout plans and blueprint data access through your mobile apps. Foster will supply you with everything you’ll need.”

“Fine. When do I start?”

“As fast as you can pack.”

“Tomorrow soon enough?”

“I’ll make the arrangements.”

“See you later,” she said. “I’ll need to pick up a few things for the road.” Tracy was off to town.

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Notes

[←1]

GOES-13 spacecraft monitors solar activities from the eastern sector of the nation where GOES-15 from the Western Sector. Both carry sophisticated Solar X-ray Imager to monitor the Sun's x-rays for the early detection of solar flares, coronal mass ejections, and other phenomena impacting the geo-space environment. This early warning was important because traveling solar disturbances affect not only the safety of humans in high-altitude missions, such as human spaceflight, but also military and commercial satellite communications. In addition, coronal mass ejections could damage long-distance electric power grids, causing extensive power blackouts.

[←2]

CME – Coronal Mass Ejection or solar wind typically travels at 250 miles per second, constantly bombarding Earth. Occasionally, a hole in the corona will shoot out a gust that moves closer to 500 miles per second, possibly reaching Earth in as little as two days. The speed varies because gusts of high- and low-speed particles often interact. The speed of any given jet of solar wind depended on the composition and the interaction of the particles. On July 23, 2012, a massive, and potentially damaging, solar superstorm (solar flare, coronal mass ejection, solar EMP) barely missed Earth, according to NASA. There was an estimated 12% chance of a similar event occurring between 2012 and 2022. CME magnitudes of M through X could cause major damages to power grids, satellites and communication infrastructures if a direct strike reaches Earth's surface.

[←3]

NDAA – The National Defense Authorization Act, in principle, was an act of legislation passed by the House and Senate reintroduced after each administration change, defining policies and rules inherent to and adherent by the government and military, at times viewed as highly controversial by the public.

[←4]

Information can be obtained through the following links:

1. <http://commdocs.house.gov/committees/security/has197010.000/has197010.000.pdf>
2. Department of the Army, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers:
<http://www.fas.org/nuke/intro/nuke/emp/toc.htm>
3. Popular Mechanics: Mechanics:
<http://popularmechanics.com/science/military/2001/9/e-bomb/print.phtml>
4. Federation of American Scientists, Intelligence Resource Program, Weapons of Mass Destruction, Intelligence Threat Assessments:
<http://www.fas.org/irp/threat/mct198-2/p2sec06.pdf>
5. Glasstone, Samuel, "The Effects of Nuclear Weapons," USAEC, April 1962, U.S. House of Representatives.
- 6.

[←5]

MAD – Mutually Assured Destruction (MAD) was the doctrine of military strategy in which a full scale use of nuclear weapons by one of two opposing sides would result in the destruction of both the attacker and the defender. It was based on the theory of deterrence according to which the deployment of strong weapons was essential to threaten the enemy in order to prevent the use of the very same weapons.

In theory, the doctrine assumed that each side had enough weaponry to destroy the other side and that either side, if attacked for any reason by the other, would retaliate with equal or greater force. The expected result was an immediate escalation resulting in both combatants' total and assured destruction. It is now generally assumed that the nuclear fallout or nuclear winter would bring about worldwide devastation, though this was never a critical assumption to the theory of MAD.

[←6]

ISIL – Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant. The [Levant](#) was a Biblical (geographical) term that referred to a large area in southwest Asia, south of the Taurus Mountains, bounded by the Mediterranean Sea in the west, the Arabian Desert in the south, and Mesopotamia in the east. It stretched 400 miles north to south from the Taurus Mountains to the Sinai desert, and 70 to 100 miles east to west between the sea and the Arabian Desert. The term was also sometimes used to refer to modern events or states in the region immediately bordering the eastern Mediterranean Sea: Cyprus, Israel, Palestine, Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria. It was this region ISIS, in the cause of the Muslim nation, has been and is fighting for.

[←7]

Muhammad is the Arabian name for Mohammed, as used throughout the westernized world.

[←8]

Universal Declaration of Human Rights – The Universal Declaration of Human Rights is a declaration adopted by the United Nations General Assembly on 10 December 1948 at the Palais de Chaillot, Paris. The Declaration arose directly from the experience of the Second World War and represents the first global expression of what many people believe to be the rights to which all human beings are inherently entitled. The full text is available on the United Nations website.

[←9]

Convention on the Rights of the Child – The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child is a human rights treaty, which sets out the civil, political, economic, social, health and cultural rights of children. The Convention defines a child as any human being under the age of eighteen, unless the age of majority is attained earlier under national legislation.

[←10]

Al Qaeda – Highlights of Islamic ideologies is listed in Appendix D.

[←11]

More specifics are detailed in Appendix B.

[←12]

Small stone building in the court of the Great Mosque at Mecca that contains a sacred black stone and is the goal of Islamic pilgrimage and the point toward which Muslims turn in pray.

[←13]

Safa and Marwah are two small hills now located in the Masjid (Arabic for Mosque) in Mecca, Saudi Arabia between which Muslims travel back and forth seven times during their ritual pilgrimages. Marwah is located about 1,150 ft from the Kaaba. The distance between Safa and Marwah is approximately 1,480 ft, so that seven trips amount to roughly 1.96 miles. The two points and the path between them are now inside a long gallery that forms part of the Mosque.

[←14]

X-37M. Still classified Air Force space mission vehicle, “M” designation for manned.

[←15]

Jihad – Islam’s 6th Pillar according to Norman Berdichevsky (June 2009), delivered to the NER Symposium in Nashville, TN. May 30, 2009.

[←16]

ISIL – The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant is an undefined region centered around Syria and historically referred to as the Levant (an archaic French phrase for the “lands of the rising sun”), that includes modern-day Syria, Lebanon, Israel, Palestine and Jordan.

[←17]

The Article that follows was written by [Mumin Salih](#), February 16, 2008, a learned scholar and prolific author on Muslim culture and Islamic faiths. See Appendix A.

[←18]

The Van Allen belt was the radiation belt layer of energetic charged particles held in place around a magnetized planet, such as the Earth, by the planet's magnetic field. The Earth had two such belts and sometimes others may be temporarily created. The discovery of the belts was credited to James Van Allen. The main belts extended from an altitude of about 600 to 40,000 miles above the surface of the Earth. Most of the particles that formed the belts were thought to come from solar wind and other particles created by cosmic rays. The belts were located in the inner region of the Earth's magnetosphere. The belts contained energetic electrons that formed the outer belt and a combination of protons and electrons that formed the inner belt. The belts, when disturbed endangered satellites and could damage all sensitive equipment in orbit and on earth.

[←19]

In a synchronous grid all the generators run not only at the same frequency but also at the same phase, each generator maintained by a local governor that regulates the driving torque by controlling the steam supply to the turbine driving it. Generation and consumption must be balanced across the entire grid, because energy is consumed almost instantaneously as it is produced. Energy is stored in the immediate short term by the rotational kinetic energy of the generators.

Electric utilities across regions were many times interconnected for improved economy and reliability. Interconnections allow for economies of scale, allowing energy to be purchased from large, efficient sources. Utilities could draw power from generator reserves from a different region in order to ensure continuing, reliable power and diversify their loads. Interconnection also allows regions to have access to cheap bulk energy by receiving power from different sources. For example, one region may be producing cheap hydro power during high water seasons, but in low water seasons, another area may be producing cheaper power through wind, allowing both regions to access cheaper energy sources from one another during different times of the year. Neighboring utilities, selling off their access, help others maintain the overall system frequency and also help manage transfers between utility regions.