

INTERLUDE: THE UNGOVERNED

Al's Protection Racket operated out of Manhattan, Kansas. Despite the name, it was a small, insurance-oriented police service with about twenty thousand customers, all within one hundred kilometers of the main shop. But apparently "Al" was some kind of humorist: His ads had a gangster motif with his cops dressed like twentieth century hoodlums. Wil Brierson guessed that it was all part of the nostalgia thing. Even the Michigan State Police - Wil's outfit - capitalized on the public's feeling of trust for old names, old traditions.

Even so, there's something more dignified about a company with a name like "Michigan State Police," thought Brierson as he brought his flier down on the pad next to Al's HQ. He stepped out of the cockpit into an eerie morning silence: It was close to sunrise, yet the sky remained dark, the air humid. Thunderheads march around half the horizon. A constant flicker of lightning chased back and forth within those clouds, yet there was not the faintest sound of thunder. He had seen a tornado killer on his way in, a lone eagle in the far sky. The weather was almost as ominous as the plea East Lansing HQ had received from Al's just four hours earlier.

A spindly figure came bouncing out of the shadows. "Am I glad to see you! The name's Alvin Swensen. I'm the proprietor." He shook Wil's hand enthusiastically. "I was afraid you might wait till the front passed though." Swensen was dressed in baggy pants and a padded jacket that would have made Frank Nitti proud. The local police chief urged the other officer up the steps. No one else was outside; the place seemed just as deserted as one might expect a rural police station early on a weekday morning. Where was the emergency?

Inside, a clerk (cop?) dressed very much like Al sat before a comm console. Swensen grinned at the other. "It's the MSP, all right. They're really coming, Jim. They're really coming! . . . Just come down the hall, Lieutenant. I got my office back there. We should clear out real soon, but for the moment I think it's safe."

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Wil nodded, more puzzled than informed. At the far end of the hall, light spilled from a half-open door. The frosted glass surface was stenciled with the words "Big Al". A faint smell of mildew hung over the aging carpet and the wool floor beneath settled perceptibly under Wil's ninety kilo tread. Brierson almost smiled: maybe Al wasn't so crazy. The gangster motif excused absolutely slovenly maintenance. Few customers would trust a normal police organization that kept its buildings like this.

Big Al urged Brierson into the light and waved him to an overstuffed chair. Though tall and angular, Swensen looked more like a school teacher than a cop - or a gangster. His reddish-blond hair stood out raggedly from his head, as though he had been pulling at it, or had just been wakened from the man's fidgety pacing about the room, Wil guesses the first possibility more likely. Swensen seemed about at the end of his rope, and Wil's arrival was some kind of reprieve. He glanced at Wil's name plate and his grin spread even further. "Well, Brierson. I've heard of you. I knew the Michigan State Police wouldn't let me down; they've sent their best."

Wil smiled in return, hoping his embarrassment didn't show. Part of his present fame was a company hype that he had come to loathe. "Thank you, uh, Big Al. We feel a special obligation to small police companies that serve no-right-to-bear-arms customers. But you're going to have to tell me more. Why so secretive?"

Al waved his hands. "I'm afraid of blabbermouths. I couldn't take a chance on the enemy learning I was bringing you into it until you were on the scene and in action."

Strange that he says "enemy," and not "crooks" or "bastards" or "hustlers." "But even a large gang might be scared off knowing-"

"Look, I'm not talking about some punk gang. I'm talking about the Republic of New Mexico. Invading. Us." He dropped into his chair and continued more calmly. It was almost as if passing the information on had taken the burden off himself. "You're shocked?"

Brierson nodded dumbly.

"Me too. Or I would have been up till a month ago. The Republic has always had plenty of internal troubles. And even though they claim all lands south of the Arkansas River,

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they have no settlements within hundreds of kilometers of here. Even now I think this is a bit of adventurism that can be squelched by an application of point force." He glanced at his watch. "Look, no matter how important speed is, we've got to do some coordinating. How many attack patrols are coming in after you?"

He saw the look on Brierson's face. "What? Only one? Damn. Well I suppose it's my fault, being secret like, but-"

Wil cleared his throat. "Big Al, there's only me. I'm the only agent MSP sent."

The other's face seemed to collapse, the relief changing to despair, then to a weak rage. "G-d-damn you to hell, Brierson. I may lose everything I've built here, and the people who trusted me may lose everything they own. But I swear I'm going to sue your Michigan State Police into oblivion. Fifteen years I've paid you guys premiums and never a claim. And now when I need max firepower, they send me one asshole with a ten-millimeter popgun."

Brierson stood, his nearly two-meter bulk towering over the other. He reached out a bear-like hand to Al's shoulder. The gesture was a strange cross between reassurance and intimidation. Wil's voice was soft but steady, "The Michigan State Police hasn't let you down, Mr. Swensen. You paid for protection against wholesale violence - and we intend to provide that protection. MSP has *never* defaulted on a contract." His grip on Alvin Swensen's shoulder tightened with these last words. The two eyed each other for a moment. Then Big Al nodded weakly, and the other sat down.

"You're right. I'm sorry. . . . I'm paying for the results, not the methods. But I know what we're up against . . . and I'm damned scared."

"And that's one reason why I'm here, Al: To find out exactly what we're up against before we jump in with our guns blazing and our pants down. What are you expecting?"

Al leaned back in the softly creaking chair. He looked out through the window into the dark silence of the morning and for a moment seemed to relax. However improbably, someone else was going to take on his problems. "They started about three years ago. It seemed innocent enough and it was certainly legal . . ." Though the Republic of New Mexico claimed the lands from the Colorado on the west to

the Mississippi on the east, and north to the Arkansas, in fact most of their settlements were along the Gulf Coast and P. Grande. For most of a century, Oklahoma and northern Texas had been uninhabited. The 'border' along the Arkansas River had been of no real concern to the Republic which had plenty of problems with its Water Wars on the Colorado - and of even less concern to the farmers at t

southern edge of the ungoverned lands. During the last ten years, immigration from the Republic toward the more prosperous north had been steadily increasing. Few of the southerners stayed in the Manhattan area: most jobs were further north. But during these last three years, wealth, New Mexicans had moved into the area, men willing to pay almost any price for farmland.

"It's clear now that these people were stooges for the Republic government. They paid more money than they could reasonably recoup from farming-and the purchase started right after the election of their latest president. You know - Hastings whatever his name is. Anyway, it made pleasant boom time for a lot of us. If some wealthy New Mexicans wanted isolated estates in the ungoverned land that was certainly their business. All the wealth in New Mexico couldn't buy one tenth of Kansas, anyway." At first the settlers had been model neighbors. They even signed up with Al's Protection Racket and Midwest Jurisprudence. But as the months passed, it became obvious that they were neither farmers nor leisured rich. As near as the locals could figure it, they were some kind of labor contractors. An tin ending stream of trucks brought raggedly dressed men and women from the cities of the south: Galveston, Corpus Christi, even from the capital, Albuquerque. These folk were housed in barracks the owners had built on the farms Anyone could see -looking in from above - that the newcomers spent long hours working in the fields.

Those farms produced on a scale that surprised the locals - and though it was still not clear that it was a profitable operation, there was a ripple of interest in the Grange journals; might manual labor hold an economic edge over the automatic equipment rentals? Soon the workers were hiring out to local farmers. "Those people work harder than any reasonable person, and they work dirt cheap. Every night,

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their contract bosses would truck'em back to the barracks, so our farmers had scarcely more overhead than they would with automatics. Overall, the NMs underbid the equipment rental people by five percent or so."

Wil began to see where all this was leading. Someone in the Republic seemed to understand Midwest Jurisprudence. "Hmm, you know, Al, if I were one of those laborers, I wouldn't hang around in farm country. There are labor services up north that can get an apprentice butler more money than some rookie cops make. Rich people will always want servants, and nowadays the pay is tremendous."

Big Al nodded. "We've got rich folks, too. When they saw what these newcomers would work for, they started drooling. And that's when things began to get sticky." At first the NM laborers could scarcely understand what they were being offered. They insisted that they were required to work when and where they were told. A few, a very few at first, took the job offers. "They were really scared, those first ones. Over and over, they wanted assurances that they would be allowed to return to their families at the end of the work day. They seemed to think the deal was some kidnap plot rather than an offer of employment. Then it was like an explosion: they couldn't wait to drop the farm jobs. They wanted to bring their families with them."

"And that's when your new neighbors closed up the camps?"

"You got it, pal. They won't let the families out. And we know they are confiscating the money the workers bring in."

"Did they claim their people were on long-term contracts?"

"Hell, no. It may be legal under justice Inc, but indentured servitude isn't under Midwest- and that's who they signed with. I see now even that was deliberate.

"It finally hit the fan yesterday. The Red Cross flew a guy out from Topeka with a writ from a Midwest judge: He was to enter each of the settlements and explain to those poor folks how they stood with the law. I went along with a couple of my boys. They refused to let us in and punched out the Red Cross fellow when he got insistent. Their chief thug- fellow named Strong - gave me a signed policy cancellation, and told me that from now on they would handle all their own

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police and justice needs. We were then escorted off the property - at gunpoint."

"So they've gone armadillo. That's no problem. But the workers are still presumptively customers of yours?"

"Not just presumptively. Before this blew up, a lot of them had signed individual contracts with me and Midwest. The whole thing is a setup, but I'm stuck."

Wil nodded. "Right. You're only choice was to call in someone with firepower, namely my company."

Big Al leaned forward, his indignation retreating before fear. "Of course. But there's more, Lieutenant. Those workers - those slaves - were part of the trap that was set for us. But most of them are brave, honest people. They know what's happening, and they aren't any happier about it than I am. Last night, after we got our butts kicked, three of them escaped. They walked fifteen kilometers into Manhattan to see me, to beg me not to intervene. To beg me not to honor the contract.

"And they told me why: For a hundred kilometer stretch of their truck ride up here, they weren't allowed to see the country they were going through. But they heard plenty. And one of them managed to work a peep hole in the side of the truck. He saw armored vehicles and attack aircraft under heavy camouflage just south of the Arkansas. The damn New Mexicans have taken part of their Texas garrison force and holed it up less than ten minutes flying time from Manhattan. And they're ready to move."

It was possible. The Water Wars with Aztlan had been winding down these last few years. The New Mexicans should have equipment reserves, even counting what they needed to **keep** the Gulf Coast cities in line. Wil got up and walked to the window. Dawn was lighting the sky above the far cloud banks. There was green in the rolling land that stretched away from the police post. Suddenly he felt very exposed here: death could come out of that sky with precious little warning. W W Brierson was no student of history, but he was an old-time movie freak, and he had seen plenty of war stories. Assuming the aggressor had to satisfy some kind of public or world opinion, there had to be a provocation, an excuse for the massive violence that would masquerade as self-defense. The New Mexicans had cleverly created a situation in which Wil Brierson -or someone like

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him - would be contractually obligated to use force against their settlements.

"So. If we hold off on enforcement, how long do you think the invasion would be postponed?" It hurt to suggest bending a contract like that, but there was precedent: in hostage cases you often used time as a weapon.

"It wouldn't slow 'em up a second. One way or another they're moving on us. I figure if we don't do anything, they'll use my 'raid' yesterday as their excuse. The only thing I can see is for MSP to put everything it can spare on the line when those bastards come across. That sort of massive resistance might be enough to scare 'em back."

Brierson turned from the window to look at Big Al. He understood now the shaking fear in the other. It had taken guts for the other to wait here through the night. But now it was W. W. Brierson's baby. "Okay, Big Al. With your permission, I'll take charge."

"You got it, Lieutenant!" Al was out of his chair, a smile splitting his face.

Wil was already starting for the door. "The first thing to do is get away from this particular ground zero. How many in the building?"

"Just two besides me."

"Round 'em up and bring them to the front room. If you have any firearms, bring them, too."

Wil was pulling his comm equipment out of the gunship when the other three came out the front door of Al's HQ and started toward him. He waved them back. "If they play as rough as you think, they'll grab for air superiority first thing. What kind of ground vehicles do you have?"

"Couple of cars. A dozen motorbikes. Jim, open up the garage." The zoot-suited trooper hustled off. Wil looked with some curiosity at the person remaining with Al. This individual couldn't be more than fourteen years old. She (?) was weighted down with five boxes, some with makeshift carrying straps, others even less portable. Most looked like communications gear. The kid was grinning from ear to ear. Al said, "Kiki van Steen, Lieutenant. She's a wargame fanatic - for once it may be worth something."

"Hi, ME."

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"Pleased to meetcha, Lieutenant." She half-lifted one of the suitcase-size boxes, as though to wave. Even with all the gear, she seemed to vibrate with excitement.

"We have to decide where to go, and how to get there. The bikes might be best, AI. They're small enough to="

"Nah. It was Kiki. "Really, Lieutenant, they're almost as easy to spot as a farm wagon. And we don't have to go far. I checked a couple minutes ago, and no enemy aircraft are up. We've got at least five minutes."

He glanced at AI, who nodded. "Okay, the car it is."

The girl's grin widened and she waddled off at high speed toward the garage. "She's really a good kid, Lieutenant. Divorced though. She spends most of what I pay her on that wargame equipment. Six months ago she started talking about strange things down south. When no one would listen, she shut up. Thank God she's here now. All night she's been watching the south. We'll know the second they jump off."

"You have some hidey-hole already set, AI?"

"Yeah. The farms southwest of here are riddled with tunnels and caves. The old Fort Riley complex. Friend of mine owns a lot of it. I sent most of my men out there last night. It's not much, but at least they won't be picking us up for free."

Around them insects were beginning to chitter, and in the trees west of the HQ there was a dove. Sunlight lined the cloud tops. The air was still cool, humid. And the darkness at the horizon remained. Twister weather. Now who will *benefit from that?*

The relative silence was broken by the sharp coughing of a piston engine. Seconds later, an incredible antique nosed out of the garage onto the driveway. Wil saw the long black lines of a pre-1950 Lincoln. Brierson and Big AI dumped their guns and comm gear into the back seat and piled in.

This nostalgia thing can be carried too far, Wil thought. A restored Lincoln would cost as much as all the rest of AI's operation. The vehicle pulled smoothly out onto the ag road that paralleled the HQ property, and Wil realized he was in an inexpensive reproduction. He should have known Big AI would keep costs down.

Behind him the police station dwindled, was soon lost in the rolling Kansas landscape. "Kiki. Can you get a line-of-sight on the station's mast?"

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The girl nodded. "Okay. I want a link to East Lansing that looks like it's coming from your station house."

"Sure." She phased an antenna ball on the mast, then gave Wil her command mike. In seconds he had spoken the destination codes and was talking first to the duty desk in East Lansing - and then to Colonel Potts and several of the directors.

When he was finished, Big AI looked at him in awe. "One hundred assault aircraft! Four thousand troopers! My God. I had no idea you could call in that sort of force."

Brierson didn't answer immediately. He pushed the mike into Kiki's hands and said. "Get on the loudmouth channels, Kiki. Start screaming bloody murder to all North America." Finally he looked back at AI, embarrassed. "We don't, AI. MSP has maybe thirty assault aircraft, twenty of them helicopters. Most of the fixed wing jobs are in the Yukon. We could put guns on our search and rescue ships - we do have hundreds of those - but it will take weeks."

AI paled, but the anger he had shown earlier was gone. "So it was a bluff?"

Wil nodded. "But we'll get everything MSP has, as fast as they can bring it in. If the New Mexican investment isn't too big, this may be enough to scare 'em back." Big AI seemed to shrink in on himself. He gazed listlessly over Jim's shoulder at the road ahead. In the front seat, Kiki was shrilly proclaiming the details of the enemy's movements, the imminence of their attack. She was transmitting call letters and insignia that could leave no doubt that her broadcast came from a legitimate police service.

The wind whipping through the open windows brought the lush smells of dew and things dark green. In the distance gleamed the silver dome of a farm's fresh produce bobble. They passed a tiny Methodist church, sparkling white amidst flowers and lawn. In back, someone was working in the pastor's garden.

The road was just good enough to support the big tires of farm vehicles. Jim couldn't do much over fifty kph. Every so often, a wagon or tractor would pass them going the other way -going off to work in the fields. The drivers waved cheerfully at the Lincoln. Atypical farm country morning in the ungoverned lands. How soon it would change. The news

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networks should have picked up on Kiki by now. They would have their own investigative people on the scene in hour with live holo coverage of whatever the enemy chose to do. Their programming, some of it directed into the Republic, might be enough to turn the enemy's public opinion against its government. *Wishful thinking.*

More likely the air above them would soon be filled with screaming metal. The end of a generation of peace.

Big Al gave a short laugh. When Wil looked at him questioningly, the small-town cop shrugged. "I was just thinking. This whole police business is something like a lending bank. Instead of gold, MSP backs its promises with force. This invasion is like a run on your 'bank of violence.' You got enough backing to handle normal demands, but when it all comes due at once . . . "

. . . *You wind up dead or enslaved.* Wil's mind shied away from the analogy. "Maybe so, but like a lot of banks, we have agreements with others. I'll bet Portland Security and the Mormons will loan us some aircraft. In any case, the Republic can never hold this land. You run a no-right-to bear-arms service; but a lot of people around here are armed to the teeth."

"Sure. My biggest competitor is justice, Inc. They encourage their customers to invest in handguns and heavy home security. Sure. The Republic will get their asses kicked eventually. But we'll be dead and bankrupt by then-and so will a few thousand other innocents."

Al's driver glanced back at them. "Hey, Lieutenant, why doesn't MSP pay one of the big power companies to retaliate -bobble places way inside the Republic?"

Wil shook his head. "The New Mexico government is sure to have all its important sites protected by Wachendon suppressors."

Suddenly Kiki broke off her broadcast monolog and let out a whoop. "Bandits! Bandits!" She handed a display flat over the seat to Al. The format was familiar, but the bouncing, jostling ride made it hard to read. The picture was base on a sidelooking radar view from orbit, with a lot of date added. Green denoted vegetation and pastel overlay, showed cloud cover. It was a jumble till he noticed that Manhattan and the Kansas River were labeled. Kiki zoomed up

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the magnification. Three red dots were visibly accelerating from a growing pockwork of red dots to the south. The three brightened, still accelerating. "They just broke cloud cover," she explained. Beside each of the dots a moving legend gave what must be altitude and speed.

"Is this going out over your loudmouth channel?"

She grinned happily. "Sure is! But not for long." She reached back to point at the display. "We got about two minutes before Al's stationhouse goes boom. I don't want to risk a direct satellite link from the car, and anything else would be even more dangerous."

Point certain, thought Wil.

"Geez, this is incredible, just incredible. For two years the Warmongers - that's my club, you know - been watching the Water Wars. We got software, hardware, cryptics everything to follow what's going on. We could predict, and bet against other clubs, but we could never actually participate. And now we have a real *roar*, right *here!*" She lapsed into awed silence, and Wil wondered fleetingly if she might be psychopathic, and not merely young and naive.

"Do you have outside cameras at the police station?" He was asking Kiki as much as Al. "We should broadcast the actual attack."

The girl nodded. "I grabbed two channels. I got the camera on the comm mast pointing southwest. We'll have public opinion completely nailed on this."

"Let's see it."

She made a moue. "Okay. Not much content to it, though." She flopped back onto the front seat. Over her shoulder, Wil could see she had an outsized display flat on her lap. It was another composite picture, but this one was overlaid with cryptic legends. They looked vaguely familiar. Then he recognized them from the movies: They were the old, old shorthand for describing military units and capabilities. The Warmongers Club must have software for translating multispec satellite observations into such displays. Hell, they might even be able to listen in on military communications. And what the girl had said about public opinion -the club seemed to play war in a very universal way. They *were* crazy, but they might also be damned useful.

Kiki mumbled something into her command mike, and

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the flat AI was holding split down the middle: on the left they could follow the enemy's approach with the map, on the right they saw blue sky and farmland and the parking lot by the stationhouse. Wil saw his gunship gleaming in the morning sunlight, just a few meters below the camera's viewpoint.

"Fifteen seconds. They might be visible if you look south."

The car swerved toward the shoulder as Jim pointed out the window: "I see 'em!"

Then Wil did, too. A triple of black insects, silent because of distance and speed. They drifted westwards, disappeared behind trees. But to the camera on the comm mast, they did not drift: they seemed to hang in the sky above the parking lot, death seen straight on. Smoke puffed from just beneath them and things small and black detached from the bodies of the attack craft - which now pulled up. The planes were so close that Wil he could see shape to them, could see sun glint from canopies. Then the bombs hit.

Strangely, the camera scarcely jolted, but started slowly to pan downward. Fire and debris roiled up around the viewpoint. A rotor section from his flier flashed past - and then the display went gray. He realized that the panning had not been deliberate: The high comm mast had been severed and was toppling.

Seconds passed and sharp thunder swept over the car, followed by the fast-dying scream of the bombers climbing back into the sky.

"So much for the loudmouth channels," said Kiki. "I'm for keeping quiet till we get underground."

Jim was driving faster now. He hadn't seen the display, but the sounds of the explosions were enough to make all but the least imaginative run like hell. The road had been bumpy, but now seemed like washboard. Wil gripped the seat ahead of him. If the enemy connected them with the broadcasts...

"How far, AI?"

"Nearest entrance is about four kilometers as the crow flies, but we gotta go all around the Schwartz farm to get to it." He waved at the high, barbed-wire fence along the right side of the road. Corn fields stretched away north of it. In the distance, Wil saw something a harvester? - amidst the green. "It'll take us fifteen minutes="

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"Ten!" claimed Jim emphatically, and the ride became still wilder.

"- to make it around the farm."

They crested a low hill. Not more than three hundred meters distant, Wil could see a side road going directly north. "But we could take that."

"Not a chance. That's on Schwartz land." Big AI glanced at the state trooper. "And I ain't just being law-abiding, Lieutenant. We'd be as good as dead to do that. Jake Schwartz went armadillo about three years ago. See that hulk out there in the field?" He tried to point, but his arm waved wildly.

"The harvester?"

"That's no harvester. It's armor. Robot, I think. If you look careful you may see the gun tracking us." Wil looked again. What he had thought was a chaff exhaust now looked more like a high velocity catapult.

Their car zipped past the T -intersection with the Schwartz road and Wil had a glimpse of a gate, and keep-out signs surmounted by what looked like human skulls. The farm west of the side road seemed undeveloped. A copse at the top of a near hill might have hid farm buildings.

"The expense. Even if it's mostly bluff..."

"It's no bluff. Poor Jake. He always was self-righteous and a bit of a bully. His police contract was with Justice, Inc and he claimed even they were too bleedin'-heart for him. Then one night his kid - who's even stupider than Jake got pig drunk and killed another idiot. Unfortunately for Jake's boy, the victim was one of my customers. There are no amelioration clauses in the Midwest/Justice Inc agreements. Reparations aside, the kid will be locked up for a long time. Jake swore he'd never contract his rights to a court again. He has a rich farm, and since then he's spent every gAu from it on more guns, more traps, more detectors. I hate to think how they live in there. There are rumors he's brought in deathdust from the Hanford ruins, just in case anybody succeeds in getting past everything else."

Oh boy. Even the armadillos up north rarely went that far.

The last few minutes Kiki had ignored them, all her attention on the strategy flat on her lap. She wore a tiny headset and was mumbling constantly into her command mike. Sud-

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denly she spoke up. "Oops. We're not going to make it, Big Al." She began folding the displays, stuffing them back into her equipment boxes. "I monitored. They just told their chopper crews to pick us up. They got us spotted easy. Two, three minutes is all we have."

Jim slowed, shouted over his shoulder. "How about if I drop you and keep going? I might be kilometers gone before they stop me." Brierson had never noticed any lack of guts among the unarmed police services.

"Good idea! Bye!" Kiki flung open her door and rolled off into the deep and apparently soft vegetation that edged the road.

"Kiki!" screamed Big Al, turning to look back down the road. They had a brief glimpse of comm and processor boxes bouncing wildly through the brush. Then Kiki's blond form appeared for an instant as she dragged the equipment deeper into the green.

From the trees behind them they could hear the *thupthupthup* of rotors. Two minutes had been an overstatement. Wil leaned forward. "No, Jim. Drive like hell. And remember: there were only three of us."

The other nodded. The car squealed out toward the center of the road, and accelerated up past eighty. The roar and thump of their progress momentarily drowned out the sound of pursuit. Thirty seconds passed, and three helicopters appeared over the tree line behind them. Do *we get what they gave the stationhouse?* An instant later white flashed from their belly guns. The road ahead erupted in a geyser of dirt and rock. Jim stepped on the brakes and the car swerved to a halt, dipping and bobbing among the craters left by the shells. The car's engine died and the thumping of rotors was a loud, almost physical pressure around them. The largest craft settled to earth amidst its own dust devil. The other two circled, their autocannons locked on Big Al's Lincoln.

The passenger hatch on the grounded chopper slid back and two men in body armor hopped out. One waved his submachine gun at them, motioning them out of the car. Brierson and the others were hustled across the road, while the second soldier went to pick up the equipment they had in the car. Wil looked back at the scene, feeling the dust in his mouth and on his sweating face—the ashes of humiliation.

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His pistol was pulled from its holster. All aboard, gentlemen." The words were spoken with a clipped, Down West accent.

Wil was turning when it happened: A flash of fire and a muffled thud came from one of the hovering choppers. Its tail rotor disappeared in a shower of debris. The craft spun uncontrollably on its main rotor and fell onto the roadway behind them. Pale flame spread along fuel lines, sputtering in small explosions. Wil could see injured crew trying to crawl out.

"I said *get aboard.*" The gunman had stepped back from them, his attention and the muzzle of his gun still on his captives. Wil guessed the man was a veteran of the Water Wars - that institutionalized violence which New Mexico and Aztlan called "warfare between nations." Once given a mission, he would not be distracted by incidental catastrophes.

The three "prisoners of war" stumbled into the relative darkness of the helicopter's interior. Wil saw the soldier still standing outside look back toward the wreck, and speak emphatically into his helmet mike. Then he hopped on and pulled the hatch to. The helicopter slid into the air, hanging close to the ground as it gradually picked up speed. They were moving westwards from the wreck, and there was no way they could look back through the tiny windows.

An accident? Who could have been equipped to shoot down an armored warcraft in the middle of Kansas fields? Then Wil remembered: Just before it lost its tail, the chopper had drifted north of the roadway, past the high fence that marked Armadillo Schwartz's land. He looked at Big Al, who nodded slightly. Brierson sat back in the canvas webbing and suppressed a smile. It was a small thing on the scale of the invasion, but he thanked God for armadillos. Now it was up to organizations like the Michigan State Police to convince the enemy that this was just the beginning, that every kilometer into the ungoverned lands would cost them similarly.

One hundred and eighty kilometers in six hours. Republican casualties: one motorcycle/truck collision, and one helicopter crash that probably a mechanical failure, Edward Strong, Special Advisor to the President, felt a satin fled smile come to his lips every time he glanced at the

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situation board. He had seen more casualties on a Freedom. Day parade through downtown Albuquerque. His own analysis for the President - as well as the larger, less imaginative analysis from JCS -had predicted that extending the Republic through Kansas to the Mississippi would be almost trivial. Nevertheless, after having fought meter by bloody meter with the fanatics of Aztlan, it was a strange feeling to be advancing hundreds of kilometers each day.

Strong paced down the narrow aisle of the Command and Control van, past the analysts and clerks. He stood for a moment by the rear door, feeling the air-conditioning billow chill around his head. Camouflage netting had been laid over the van, but he could see through it without difficulty: green leaves played tag with shadows across pale yellow limestone. They were parked in a wooded creek bed on the land Intelligence had bought several years earlier. Somewhere to the north were the barracks which now confined the people Intelligence had imported, allegedly to work the farms. Those laborers had provided whatever legal justification was needed for this move into the ungoverned lands. Strong wondered if any of them realized their role - and realized that in a few months they would be free of poverty, realized that they would own farms in a land that could be made infinitely more hospitable than the deserts of the Southwest.

Sixteen kilometers to the northeast lay Manhattan. It was a minor goal, but the Republic's forces were cautious. It would be an important - though small - test of their analysis. There were Tinkers in that town and in the countryside beyond. The precision electronics and related weapons that came out of the Tinkers' shops were worthy of respect and caution. Privately, Strong considered them to be the only real threat to the success of the invasion he had proposed to the President three years earlier. (Three years. Of planning, of cajoling resources from other departments, of trying to inject imagination into minds that had been closed for decades. By far the easiest part had been the operations here in Kansas.)

The results of the move on Manhattan would be relayed from here to General Crick at the head of the armor driving east along Old 70. Later in the afternoon, Crick's tank car

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riers should reach the outskirts of Topeka. The Old US highway system provided a mode of armored operations previously unknown to warfare. If the taking of Manhattan went as planned, then Crick might have Topeka by nightfall and be moving the remainder of his forces on to the Mississippi.

Strong looked down the van at the time posted on the situation board. The President would be calling in twenty minutes to witness the move against Manhattan. Till then a lull gapped in Strong's schedule. Perhaps there was time for one last bit of caution. He turned to the bird colonel who was his military liaison. "Bill, those three locals you picked up you know, the protection racket people - I'd like to talk to them before the Chief calls in."

"Here?"

"If possible."

"Okay." There was faint disapproval in the officer's voice. Strong imagined that the Bill Alvarez couldn't quite see bringing enemy agents into the C&C van. But what the hell, they were clean - and there was no way that they could report what they saw here. Besides, he had to stay in the van in case the Old Man showed up early.

Minutes later, the three shuffled into the conference area at the front of the van. Restraints glinted at their hands and ankles. They stood in momentary blindness in the darkness of the van, and Strong had a chance to look them over: three rather ordinary human beings, dressed in relatively extraordinary ways. The big black wore a recognizable uniform, complete with badges, side-arm holster and what appeared to be riding boots. He looked the model fascist. Strong recognized the Michigan State "Police" insignia on his sleeve. MSP was one of the most powerful gangster combines in the ungoverned lands. Intelligence reported they had some modern weapons - enough to keep their "clients" in line, anyway.

Sit down, gentlemen." Amidst a clanking of shackles, the three sat, sullen. Behind them an armed guard remained standing. Strong glanced at the intelligence summary he had punched up. "Mr., uh, Lieutenant Brierson, you may be interested to know that the troops and aircraft you asked your bosses for this morning have not materialized. Our intel-

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ligence people haven't changed their estimate that you were making a rather weak bluff."

The northerner just shrugged, but the blond fellow in the outrageously striped shirt -Alvin Swensen, the report named him - leaned forward and almost hissed. "Maybe, maybe not, asshole! But it doesn't matter. You're going to kill a lot of people, but in the end you'll be dragging your bloody tail back south."

Figuratively speaking, Strong's ears perked up. "How is that, Mr. Swensen?"

"Read your history. You're stealing from a free people now -not a bunch of Aztlan serfs. Every single farm, every single family is against you, and these are educated people, many with weapons. It may take a while. It may destroy a lot of things we value. But every day you stay here, you'll bleed. And when you've bled enough to see this, then you'll go home."

Strong glanced at the casualty report on the situation board, and felt laughter stealing up. "You poor fool. What free people? We get your video, your propaganda. But what does it amount to? There hasn't been a government in this part of the continent for more than eighty years. You petty gangsters have the guns and have divided up the territory. Most of you don't even allow your `clients' firearms. I'll wager that the majority of your victims will welcome a government where there is a franchise to be exercised, where ballots and not MSP bullets decide issues.

"No, Mr. Swensen, the little people in the ungoverned lands have no stake in your status quo. And as for the armed groups fighting some kind of guerrilla war against us... Well, you've had it easier than you know for along time. You haven't lived in a land as poor as old New Mexico. Since the Bobble War, we've had to fight for every liter of water, against an enemy far more determined and bloodthirsty than you may imagine. We have prevailed, we have revived and maintained democratic government, and we have remained free men-

"Sure. Free like the poor slobs you got locked up over there." Swensen waved in the direction of the workers' barracks.

Strong leaned across the narrow conference table to pin

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Swensen with his glare. "Mister, I grew up as one of `those slobs.' In New Mexico, even people that poor have a chance to get something better. This land you claim is practically empty! You don't know how to farm it, you don't have a government to manage large dam and irrigation projects, you don't even know how to use government agriculture policy to encourage its proper use by individuals.

"Sure, those workers couldn't be told why they were brought here. But when this over, they will be heroes, with homesteads they had never imagined being able to own."

Swensen rocked back before the attack, but was plainly unconvinced. *Which makes sense*, thought Strong. *Horn can a wolf imagine anyone sincerely wishing good for sheep?*

An alert light glowed on Strong's display and one of the clerks announced, "Presidential transmission under way, Mr. Strong." He swore behind his teeth. The Old Man was early. He'd hoped to get some information out of these three, not just argue politics.

A glowing haze appeared at the head of the conference table and quickly solidified into the image of the fourth President of the Republic. Hastings Martinez was good-looking with bio-age around fifty years - old enough to inspire respect, young enough to appear decisive. In Strong's opinion, he was not the best president the Republic had seen, but he had the advisor's respect and loyalty nevertheless. There was something in the very responsibility of the office of the Presidency that made its holder larger than life.

"Mr. President," Strong said respectfully.

"Ed," Martinez's image nodded. The projection was nearly as substantial as the forms of those truly present; Strong didn't know whether this was because of the relative darkness within the van, or because Martinez was transmitting via fiber from his estate in Alva, just three hundred kilometers away.

Strong waved at the prisoners. "Three locals, sir. I was hoping to-"

Martinez leaned forward. "Why, I think I've seen you before." He spoke to the MSP officer. "The ads Michigan State Police uses; our intelligence people have shown me some. You protect MSP's client mobs from outside gangs."

Brierson nodded, smiled wryly. Strong recognized him

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now and kicked himself for not noticing earlier. If those ads were correct, then Brierson was one of the top men in the MSE

"They make you out to be some sort of superman. Do you honestly think your people can stop a modern, disciplined army?"

"Sooner or later, Mr. Martinez. Sooner or later."

The President smiled, but Strong wasn't sure whether he was piqued or truly amused. "Our armor is approaching Manhattan on schedule, sir. As you know, we regard this action as something of a bench mark. Manhattan is almost as big as Topeka, and has a substantial cottage electronics industry. It's about the closest thing to a city you'll find in the ungoverned lands." Strong motioned for the guard to remove the three prisoners, but the President held up his hand.

"Let 'em stay, Ed. The MSP man should see this firsthand. These people may be lawless, but I can't believe they are crazy. The sooner they realize that we have overwhelming force - and that we use it fairly - the sooner they'll accept the situation."

"Yes, sir." Strong signaled his analysts, and displays came to life on the situation board. Simultaneously, the conference table was overhung with a holographic relief map of central Kansas. The northerners looked at the map and Strong almost smiled. They obviously had no idea the size of the New Mexican operation. For months the Republic had been building reserves along the Arkansas. It couldn't be entirely disguised; these three had known something about the forces. But until the whole military machine was in motion, its true size had escaped them. Strong was honest with himself. It was not New Mexican cleverness that had outwitted northern electronics. The plan could never have worked without advanced countermeasures equipment - some of it bough from the northerners themselves.

Computer-selected radio traffic became a background noise. He had rehearsed all this with the technicians earlier; there was not a single aspect of the operation that the President would miss. He pointed at the map. "Colonel Alvarez has one armored force coming north from Old 70. It should enter Manhattan from the east. The other force left here a few minutes ago, and is

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approaching town along this secondary road." Tiny silver lights crept along the map where he pointed. A few centimeters above the display, other lights represented helicopter and fixed-wing cover. These coasted gracefully back and forth, occasionally swooping close to the surface.

A voice spoke against a background of turbine noise, to announce no resistance along the eastern salient. "Haven't really seen anyone. People are staying indoors, or else bobbed up before we came in range. We're avoiding houses and farm buildings, sticking to open fields and roads."

Strong expanded one of the views from the western salient. The situation board showed a picture taken from the air: A dozen tanks moved along a dirt road, trails of dust rising behind them. The camera chopper must have been carrying a mike, for the rumbling and clanking of treads replaced the radio traffic for a moment. Those tanks were the pride of New Mexico. Unlike the aircraft, their hulls and engines were one hundred percent Product of the Republic. New Mexico was poor in most resources, but like Japan in the twentieth century, and Great Britain before that, she was great in people, and ingenuity. Someday soon, she would be great in electronics. For now, though, all the best reconnaissance and communication gear came from Tinkers - many in the ungoverned lands. That was an Achilles' heel, long recognized by Strong and others. It was the reason for using equipment from different manufacturers all over the world, and for settling for second-class gear in some of the most critical applications. How could they know, for certain, that the equipment they bought was not booby-trapped or bugged? There was historical precedent: The outcome of the Bobble War had been due in large part to Tinker meddling with the old Peace Authority's reconnaissance system.

Strong recognized the stretch of road they were coming up on: a few hundred meters beyond the lead tank lay an irregular blackened area and the twisted metal that had once been a helicopter.

A puff of smoke appeared by the lead tank, followed by the faint crack of an explosion. Bill Alvarez's voice came on an instant after that. "Under fire. Light mortar." The tank was moving again, but in a large circle, toward the ditch. Guns and sensors on the other armor swung north. "The enemy

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was lucky, or that was a smart round We've got radar backtrack. The round came from beyond the other side of the farm we're passing. Looks like a tunnel entrance to the old Fort Riley - Wait, we got enemy radio traffic just before it happened."

His voice was replaced by the crackling of high amplification. The new voice was female, but barely understandable. "General van Steen to forces [unintelligible]. You may fire when ready" There was a screaming sound and other voices.

Strong saw Swensen's jaw sag in surprise, or horror.

"General van Steen?"

Colonel Alvarez's voice came back. "There were replies from several points further north. The original launch site has fired two more rounds." As he spoke, black smoke appeared near the treads of two more tanks. Neither was destroyed, but neither could continue.

"Mr. President, Mr. Strong, all rounds are coming from the same location. These are barely more than fireworks except that they're smart. I'll wager 'General van Steen' is some local gangster putting up a brave front. We'll see in a minute." On the holomap, two blips drew away from the other support aircraft and began a low level dash across the miniature Kansas landscape.

The President nodded, but addressed another unseen observer. "General Crick?"

"I concur, sir." Crick's voice was as loud and clear as

Alvarez's, though the general was fifty kilometers to the east, at the head of the column en route to Topeka. "But we've seen an armored vehicle in the intermediate farmland, haven't we, Bill?"

"Yes," said Alvarez. "It's been there for months. Looks like a hulk. We'll take it out, too."

Strong noticed the northerners tense. Swensen seemed on the verge of screaming something. What do *they know*?

The attack planes, twin engine green-and-gray jobs, were on the main view now. They were only twenty or thirty meters up, well below the camera viewpoint, and probably not visible from the enemy launch site. The lead craft angled slightly to the east, and spewed rockets at an unmoving silhouette that was almost hidden by the hills and the corn. A

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Second later, the target disappeared in a satisfying geyser of flame and dirt.

- and a second after *that*, hell on Earth erupted from the peaceful fields: beams of pale light flashed from unseen projectors, and the assault aircraft became falling, swelling balls of fire. As automatic fire control brought the tanks' guns to bear on the source of the destruction, rocket and laser fire came from other locations immediately north of the roadway. Four of the tanks exploded immediately, and most of the rest were on fire. Tiny figures struggled from their machines, and ran from the flames.

North of the farm, Strong thought he saw explosions at the source of the original mortar attack. Something was firing in that direction, too!

Then the camera chopper took a hit, and the picture swung round and round, descending into the fire storm that stretched along the roadway. The view went dark. Strong's carefully planned presentation was rapidly degenerating into chaos. Alvarez was shouting over other voices, demanding the reserves that still hung along Old 70 directly south of Manhattan. And he could hear Crick working to divert portions of his air cover to the fight that was developing.

It wasn't till much later that Strong made sense of the conversation that passed between the northerners just then:

"Kiki, how could you!" Swensen slumped over the holomap, shaking his head in despair (shame?).

Brierson eyed the displays with no visible emotion. "What she did is certainly legal, Al."

"Sure it is. And immoral as hell. Poor Jake Schwartz. Poor Jake."

The view of the battle scene reappeared. The picture was almost the same perspective as before, but grainier and faintly wavering -probably from a camera aboard some recon craft far south of the fighting. The holomap flickered as major updates came in. The locals had been thorough and successful. There were no effective New Mexican forces within five kilometers of the original flareup. The force dug in to the farmland was firing rockets southward, taking an increasing toll of the armored reinforcements that were moving north from Old 70.

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"Crick here, Mr. President." The general's voice was bris. professional. Any recriminations with Intelligence would come later. "The enemy is localized, but incredibly well dug in. If he's isolated, we might be able to bypass him, but neither Alvarez nor I want something like that left on our flank We're going to soften him up, then move our armor right i< on top."

Strong nodded to himself. In any case, they had to take this strong point just to find out what the enemy really had. In the air over the holomap, dozens of lights moved toward the enemy fortress. Some flew free ballistic arcs, while others stuck close to the ground, out of the enemy's direct fire. Across the table, the holo lit the northerners' faces: Swensen's even more pale than before, Brierson's dark and stolid. There was a faint stench of sweat in the air now, barely perceptible against the stronger smells of metal and fresh plastic.

Damn. Those three had been surprised by the ambush -but Strong was sure that they understood what was behind the attack, and whence the next such would come. Given time and Special Service drugs, he could have the answers. He leaned across the table and addressed the MSP officer. "So. You aren't entirely bluff: But unless you have many more such traps, you won't do more than slow us up - and kill a lot of people on both sides."

Swensen was about to answer, then looked at Brierson and was silent. The black seemed to be deliberating just what or how much to say; finally, he shrugged. "I won't lie to you. The attack had nothing to do with MSP forces."

"Some other gang then?"

"No. You just happened to run into a farmer who defends his property."

"Bull." Ed Strong had spent his time in the military - in combat along the Colorado. He knew how to read the intelligence displays and manage tactics. But he also knew what it was like to be on the ground where the reality was bullets and shrapnel. He knew what it took to set up a defense like the one they had just seen. "Mr. Brierson, you're telling me one man could afford to buy the sort of equipment we saw and to dig it in so deep that even now we don't have a clear picture of his set-up? You're telling me that one man could afford an MHD source for those lasers?"

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"Sure. That family has probably been working at this for years, spending every spare gAu on the project, building the system up little by little. Even so," he sighed, "they should be out of rockets and juice soon. You could lay off."

The rain of rocket-borne and artillery high explosives was beginning to fall upon the target. Flashes and color sparkled across the screen, more an abstract pattern than a landscape now. There was no human life, no equipment visible. The bombers were standing off and lobbing their cargo in. Until the enemy's defenses were broken, any other course was needless waste. After a couple minutes, the airborne debris obscured all but the largest detonations. Napalm flared within, and the whole cloud glowed beautiful yellow. For a few seconds, the enemy lasers still flashed, spectacular and ineffective in all the dirt. Even after the lasers died, the holomap showed isolated missiles emerging from the target area to hunt for the bombers. Then even those stopped coming.

Still the barrage continued, raising the darkness and light high over the Kansas fields. There was no sound from this display, but the *thudthudding* of the attack came barely muffled through the hull of the C&C van -they were, after all, less than seven thousand meters from the scene. It was mildly surprising that the enemy had not tried to take them out. Perhaps Brierson was more important - and more knowledgeable-than he admitted.

Minutes passed, and they all - President and gangsters alike -watched the barrage end and the wind push the haze away from the devastation that modern war can make. North and east, fires spread through the fields. The tanks - and final, physical possession of the disputed territory - were only minutes away.

The destruction was not uniform. New Mexican fire had focused on the projectors and rocket launchers - and there the ground was pulverized, ripped first by proximity-fused high explosives, then by digger bombs and napalm. As they watched, recon craft swooped low over the landscape, their multiscanners searching for any enemy weapons that might be held in reserve. When the tanks and personnel carriers arrived, a more thorough search would be made on foot.

Finally, Strong returned to Brierson's fantastic claim. "And

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you say it's just coincidence that this one farmer who spends all his money on weapons happens to be on our line of march."

"Coincidence and a little help from . . . General van Steen."

President Martinez raised his eyes from the displays at his end. His voice was level, but Strong recognized the tension there. "Mr., uh, Brierson. just how many of these miniforts are there?"

The other sat back. His words might have seemed insolent, but there was no sarcasm in his voice. "I have no idea, Mr. Martinez. As long as they don't bother our customers, they are of no interest to MSP. Many aren't as well hidden as Schwartz, but you can't count on that. As long as you stay off their property, most of them won't touch you."

"You're saying that if we detect and avoid them, they are no threat to our plans?"

"Yes."

The main screen showed the tank forces now. They were a few hundred of meters from the burning fields. The viewpoint rotated and Strong saw that Crick had not stinted: at least one hundred tanks -most of the reserve force - were advancing on a five thousand meter front. Following were even more personnel carriers. Tactical air support was heavy. Any fire from the ground ahead would be met by immediate destruction. The camera rotated back to show the desolation they were moving into. Strong doubted that anything living, much less anything hostile, still existed in that moonscape.

The President didn't seem interested in the display. All his attention was on the northerner. "So we can avoid these stationary gunmen till we find it convenient to deal with them. You are a great puzzle, Mr. Brierson. You claim strengths and weaknesses for your people that are equally incredible. And I get the feeling you don't really expect us to believe you, but that somehow you believe everything you're saying."

"You're very perceptive. I've thought of trying to bluff you. In fact, I did try earlier today. From the looks of your equipment," He waved his hand at the Command and Control consoles, a faintly mocking smile on his face, "we might even be able to bluff you back where you belong. This *ONCE*."

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But when you saw what we had done, you'd be back again next year, next decade - and we'd have to do it all over again without the bluffs. So, Mr. Martinez, I think it best you learn what you're up against the first time out. People like Schwartz are just the beginning. Even if you can rub out them and services like MSP, you'll end up with a guerrilla war like you've never fought - one that can actually turn your own people against you . . . You do practice conscription, don't you?"

The President's face hardened, and Strong knew that the northerner had gone too far. "We do, as has every free nation in history - or at least every nation that was determined to stay free. If you're implying that our people would desert under fire or because of propaganda, you are contradicting my personal experience." He turned away, dismissing Brierson from his attention.

"They've arrived, sir." As the tanks rolled into position on the smoking hillsides, the personnel carriers began disgorging infantry. The tiny figures moved quickly, dragging gear toward the open tears in the earth. Strong could hear an occasional popping sound: Misfiring engines? Remnant ammo?

Tactical aircraft swept back and forth overhead, their rockets and guns ready to support the troopers on the ground. The techs' reports trickled in.

"Three video hard points detected. . . ." Small arms fire chattered. "Two destroyed, one recovered . . . Sonoprobes show lots of tunnels. Electrical activity at. . ." The men in the picture looked up, at something out of view.

Nothing else changed on the picture, but the radars saw the intrusion, and the holomap showed the composite analysis: a mote of light rose leisurely out of the map, five hundred meters, six hundred. It moved straight up, slowed. The support aircraft swooped down upon it and

A purple flash, bright yet soundless, seemed to go off *inside* Strong's head. The holomap and the displays winked down to nothing, then came back. The President's image reappeared but there was no sound, and it was clear he was not receiving.

Along the length of the van, clerks and analysts came out of that stunned moment to work frantically with their equip

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ment. Acrid smoke drifted into the conference area. The safe, crisp displays had been replaced by immediate, deadly reality. "High flux nuke." The voice was calm, almost mechanical,

High flux nuke. Radiation bomb. Strong came to his feet, rage and horror burning inside him. Except for bombs in lapsed bobbles, no nuclear weapon had exploded in North America in nearly eighty years. Even during the bitterest years of the Water Wars, both Aztlan and New Mexico had seen the suicide implicit in nuclear solutions. But here, in a rich land, without warning and for no real reason -

"*You animals!*" he spat down upon the seated northerners.

Swensen lunged forward. "God damn it! Schwartz isn't one of my customers!"

Then the shock wave hit. Strong was thrown across the map, his face buried in the glowing terrain. Just as suddenly he was thrown back. The prisoners' guard had been knocked into the far wall; now he stumbled forward through Martinez's unseeing image, his stun gun flying from his hand.

From the moment of the detonation, Brierson had sat hunched, his arms extended under the table. Now he moved, lunging across the table to sweep up the gun between his manacled hands. The muzzle sparkled and Strong's face went numb. He watched in horror as the other twisted and raked the length of the van with stunfire. The men back there had themselves been knocked about. Several were just coming up off their knees. Most didn't know what hit them when they collapsed back to the floor. At the far end of the van, one man had kept his head. One man had been as ready as Brierson:

Bill Alvarez popped up from behind an array processor, a five-millimeter slug gun in his hand, flashing fire as he moved.

Then the numbness seemed to squeeze in on Strong's mind, and everything went gray.

Wil looked down the dim corridor that ran the length of the command van. No one was moving, though a couple men were snoring. The officer with the handgun had col

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lapsed, his hands hanging limp just a few centimeters from his pistol. Blue sky showing through the wall above Wil's head was evidence of the fellow's determination; if the other had been a hair faster...

Wil handed the stun gun to Big Al. "Let Jim go down and pick up the slug gun. Give an extra dose to anyone who looks suspicious."

Al nodded, but there was still a dazed look in his eyes. In the last hour his world had been turned upside down. How many of his customers-the people who paid for his protection - had been killed? Wil tried not to think about that; indirectly those same people had been depending on MSP. Almost tripping on his fetters, he stepped over the fallen guard and sat down on the nearest technician's saddle. For all New Mexico being a foreign land, the controls were familiar. It wasn't too surprising. The New Mexicans used a lot of Tinker electronics - though they didn't seem to trust it: much of the equipment's performance was degraded where they had replaced suspicious components with their own devices. Ah, the price of paranoia.

Brierson picked up a command mike, made a simple request, and watched the answer parade across the console. "Hey, Al, we stopped transmitting right at the detonation!" Brierson quickly entered commands that cleared Martinez's image and blocked any future transmissions. Then he asked for status.

The air-conditioning was down, but internal power could keep the gear going for a time. The van's intelligence unit estimated the nuke had been a three kiloton equivalent with a seventy percent radiance. Brierson felt his stomach flip-flop. He knew about nukes - perhaps more than the New Mexicans. There was no legal service that allowed them and it was open season on armadillos who advertised having them, but every so often MSP got a case involving such weapons. Everyone within two thousand meters of that blast would already be dead. Schwartz's private war had wiped out a significant part of the invading forces.

The people in the van had received a sizable dose from the Schwartz nuke - though it wouldn't be life-shortening if they got medical treatment soon. In the division command area immediately around the van, the exposure was some

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what higher. How long would it be before those troops came nosing around the silent command vehicle? If he could get a phone call out -

But then there was Fate's personal vendetta against W. W. Brierson: Loud pounding sounded at the forward door. Wil waved Jim and Al to be quiet. Awkwardly, he got off the saddle and moved to look through the old-fashioned viewplate mounted next to the door: In the distance he could see men carrying stretchers from an ambulance; some of the burn cases would be really bad. Five troopers were standing right at the doorway, close enough that he could see blistered skin and burned clothing. But their weapons looked fine, and the wiry noncom pounding on the door was alert and energetic. "Hey, open up in there!"

Wil thought fast. What was the name of that vip civilian? Then he shouted back (doing his best to imitate the clipped New

Mexican accent), "Sorry. Mr. Strong doesn't want to breach internal atmosphere." Pray *they don't see the bullet hole just around the corner.*

He saw the sergeant turn away from the door. Wil lip-read the word shit. He could almost read the noncom's mind: the men outside had come near to being french-fried, and here some silkshirt supervisor was worried about so-far-nonexistent fallout.

The noncom turned back to the van and shouted, "How about casualties?"

"Outside of rod exposure, just some bloody noses and loose teeth. Main power is down and we can't transmit," Wil replied.

"Yessir. Your node has been dropped from the network. We've patched backward to Oklahoma Leader and forward to div mobile. Oklahoma Leader wants to talk to Mr. Strong. Div mobile wants to talk to Colonel Alvarez. How long will it be till you're back on the air?"

How long can I ask for? How long do I need? "Give us fifteen minutes," he shouted, after a moment.

"Yes, sir. We'll get back to you." Having innocently delivered this threat, the sergeant and his troopers moved off.

Brierson hopped back to the console. "Keep your eyes on the sleepers, Al. If I'm lucky, fifteen minutes should be enough time."

"To do what? Call MSP?"

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"Something better. Something I should have done this morning." He searched through the command menus for satellite pickups. The New Mexican military was apparently *leery of using* subscription services, but there should be some facility for it. . . Ah, there it was. Brierson phased the transmitter for the synchronous satellite the Hainan commune had hung over Brazil. With narrow beam, he might be able to talk through it without the New Mexicans realizing he was transmitting. He tapped in a credit number, then a destination code.

The display showed the call had reached Whidbey Island. Seconds passed. Outside, he could hear choppers moving into the camp. More ambulances? *Damn you, Rober. Be home.*

The conference area, filled with bluish haze, then became a sunlit porch overlooking a wooded bay. Sounds of laughter and splashing came faintly from the water. Old Roberto Richardson never used less than full holo. But the scene was pale, almost ghostly - the best the van's internal power supply could do. A heavy-set man with apparent age around thirty came up the steps onto the porch and sat down; it was Richardson. He peered out at them. "Wil? Is that you?"

If it weren't for the stale air and the dimness of the vision, Wil could almost believe he'd been transported halfway across the continent. Richardson lived on an estate that covered the whole of Whidbey Island. In the Pacific time zone it was still morning, and shadows swept across lawn-like spaces that stretched away to his manicured forests. Not for the first time, Wil was reminded of the faerie landscapes of Maxfield Parrish. Roberto Richardson was one of the richest men in the world; he sold a line of products which many people can not resist. He was rich enough to live in whatever fantasy world he chose.

Brierson turned on the pickup that watched the conference table.

"Dios. It is you, Wil! I thought you were dead or captured."

"Neither just yet. You're following this ruckus?"

"*Por cierto. And* most news services are covering it- I wager they're spending more money than your blessed Michigan State Police on this war. Unless that nuke was one of yours? Wili, my boy, that was spectacular. You took out twenty percent of their armor."

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"It wasn't one of ours, Rober."

"Ah. Just as well. Midwest jurisprudence would withdraw service for something like that."

Time was short, but Wil couldn't resist asking, "What is MSP up to?"

Richardson sighed. "About what I'd expect. They've finally brought some aircraft in. They're buzzing around the tip of Dave Crick's salient. The Springfield Cyborg Club has gone after the New Mexican supply lines. They are causing some damage. A cyborg is a bit hard to kill, and Norcross Security is supplying them with transports and weapons. The New Mexicans have Wachendon suppressors down to battalion level, so there's no bobbling. The fighting looks quite twentieth century.

"You've got a lot of public opinion behind you - even in the Republic, I think -but not much firepower.

"You know, Wil, you fellows should have bought more from me. You saved a few million, maybe, passing up those aerial torpedoes and assault craft, and the tanks. But look where you are now. If-

"Jesus, that's Rober Richardson!" It was Big Al; he had been watching the holo with growing wonder.

Richardson squinted at his display. "I can hardly see anything on this, Wil. Where in perdition are you calling from? And to you, Unseen *Sir, it's Roberto* Richardson."

Big Al walked toward the sunlit porch. He got within an apparent two meters of Richardson before he banged into the conference table. "You're the sort of scum who's responsible for this! You sold the New Mexicans everything they couldn't build themselves: the high performance aircraft, the military electronics." Al waved at the cabinets in the darkened van. What he claimed was largely true. Wil had noticed the equipment stenciled with Richardson's logo, "USAF Inc - Sellers of Fine Weapon Systems for More than Twenty Years"; the New Mexicans hadn't even bothered to paint it out. Roberto had started out as a minor Aztlan nobleman. He'd been in just the right place at the time of the Bobble War, and had ended up controlling the huge munition dumps left by the old Peace Authority. That had been the beginning of his fortune. Since then, he had moved into the ungoverned lands, and begun manufacturing much of

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his own equipment. The heavy industry he had brought to Bellevue was almost on the scale of the twentieth century -or of modern New Mexico.

Richardson came half out of his chair and chopped at the air in front of him. "See here. I have to take enough such insults from my niece and her grandchildren. I don't have to take them from a stranger." He stood, tossed his display flat on the chair, and walked to the steps that led down to his shaded river.

"Wait, Rober!" shouted Brierson. He waved Big Al back to the depths of the van. "I didn't call to pass on insults. You wondered where I'm calling from. Well, let me tell you -"

By the time he finished, the old gunrunner had returned to his seat. He started to laugh. "I should have guessed you'd end up talking right out of the lion's mouth." His laughter halted abruptly. "But you're trapped, aren't you? No last minute Brierson tricks to get out of this one? I'm sorry, Wil, I really am. If there were anything I could do, I would. I don't forget my debts."

Those were the words Wil had been hoping to hear. "There's nothing you can do for me, Rober. Our bluff in this van is good for just a few minutes. But... we could all use a little charity just now."

The other looked nonplussed.

"Look, I'll bet you have plenty of aircraft and armor going through final checkout at the Bellevue plant. And I know you have ammunition stocks. Between MSP and Justice Inc and a few other police services, we have enough war buffs to man them. At least we have enough to make these New Mexicans think twice."

But Richardson was shaking his head. "I'm a charitable man, Wil. If I had such things to loan, MSP could have some for the asking But you see, we've all been a bit outsmarted here. The New Mexicans - and people I now think are fronting for them - have options on the next four months of my production. You see what I mean? It's one thing to help people I like, and another to break a contract - especially when reliability has always been one of my most important selling points."

Wil nodded. So much for that brilliant idea.

"And it may turn out for the best, Wil," Richardson con

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tinued quietly. "I know your loudmouthed friend won't believe this coming from me, but - I think the Midwest might now be best off not to fight. We both know the invasion can't stick, not in the long run. It's just a question of how many lives and how much property is going to be destroyed in the meantime . . . and how much ill-feeling is going to be stored up for the future. Those New Mexicans deserve to get nuked and all the rest, but that could steel them for a holy war -like they've been fighting along the Colorado for so long. On the other hand, if you let them come in and take a whack at 'governing' - why in twenty years you'll have them converted into happy anarchists."

Wil smiled in spite of himself. Richardson was certainly the prime example of what he was talking about. Wil knew the old autocrat had originally been an agent of Aztlan sent to prepare the Northwest for invasion. "Okay, Rober. I'll think about it. Thanks for talking."

Richardson seemed to have guessed Wil's phantom position on his porch. His dark eyes stared intensely into Wil's. "Take care of yourself, Wili."

The cool, northern playground wavered for a second, like a dream of paradise - then vanished, replaced by the hard reality of dark plastic, glimmering displays, and unconscious New Mexicans. *What now, Lieutenant?* Calling Rober had been his only real idea. He could call MSP, but he had nothing helpful to tell them. He leaned on the console, his hands sliding slickly across his sweaty face. Why not just do as Rober suggested? Give up and let the tide of history take care of things.

No. Lots of people talk about the "inevitable tide of history." Brierson couldn't imagine such a thing, except as it might exist in the determination and imagination of individuals. Government had been a human institution for thousands of years; there was no reason to believe the Republic of New Mexico would fall apart by itself. Their actions had to be shown to be impractically expensive.

And there was another, more personal, reason. Richardson talked as though this invasion were something special, something that transcended commerce and courts and contracts. That was wrong. Except for their power --and their self-righteousness -the New Mexicans were no different from some chopper gang marauding MSP cus

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tomers. And if he and MSP let them take over, it would be just as much a default. As with Rober, reliability was one of MSP's strongest selling points.

So MSP had to keep fighting. The only question was, what could he and Al and Jim do now?

Wil twisted around to look at the exterior view mounted by the hatch. It was a typically crass design flaw that the view was independent of the van's computers and couldn't be displayed except at the doorway.

There wasn't much to see. The division HQ was dispersed, and the van itself sat in the bottom of a ravine. The predominant impression was of smoking foliage and yellow limestone. He heard the keening of light turbines. Oh boy. Three overland cars were coming their way. He recognized the sergeant he had talked to a few minutes earlier. If there was anything left to do, he'd better do it now.

He glanced around the van. Strong was a high presidential advisor. Was that worth anything? Wil tried to remember. In Aztlan, with its feudal setup, such a man might be very important. The safety of just a few leaders was the whole purpose of that government. The New Mexicans were different. Their rulers were elected; there were clear laws of succession, and people like Strong were probably expendable. Still, there was an idea here: such a state was something like an enormous corporation, with the citizens as stockholders. The analogy wasn't perfect - no corporation could use the coercion these people practiced on their own. And there were other differences. But still. If the top people in such an enormous organization were threatened, it would be enormously more effective than if - say - the board of directors of MSP were hassled. There were at least ten police services as powerful as MSP in the ungoverned lands, and many of them subcontracted to smaller firms.

The question, then, was how to get their hands on someone like Hastings Martinez or this General Crick. He punched up an aerial view from somewhere south of the combat area. A train of clouds had spread southeast from the Schwartz farm. Otherwise the air was faintly hazy. Thunderheads hung at the northern horizon. The sky had that familiar feel to it. Topeka Met Service confirmed the feeling: this was tornado weather.

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Brierson grimaced. He had known that all day. And somewhere in the back of his mind, there had been the wild hope that the tornados would pick the right people to land on, which was absurd: modern science could kill tornados, but no one could direct them. *Modern science can kill tornados.* He swallowed. There was something he could do - if there was time. One call to headquarters was all he needed.

Outside, there was pounding on the door and shouting. More ominous, he heard a scrabbling noise and the van swayed slightly on its suspension: someone was climbing onto the roof. Wil ignored the footsteps above him, and asked the satellite link for a connection to MSP. The blue and gold Michigan State logo had just appeared when the screen went dead. Wil tapped futilely at emergency codes, then looked at the exterior view again. A hard-faced major was standing next to the van.

Wil turned on the audio and interrupted the other. "We just got sound working here, Major. What's up?"

This stopped the New Mexican, who had been half-way through shouting his message at them. The officer stepped back from the van and continued in more moderate tones. "I was saying there's no fallout problem." Behind him, one of the troopers was quietly barfing into the bushes. There might be no fallout, but unless the major and his men got medical treatment soon, they would be very sick soldiers. "There's no need for you to stay buttoned up."

"Major, we're just about ready to go back on the air. I don't want to take any chances."

"Who am I speaking to?"

"Ed Strong, Special Advisor to the President," Wil spoke the words with the same ponderous importance the real Ed Strong might have used.

"Yes, sir. May I speak with Colonel Alvarez?"

"Alvarez?" Now that was a man the major must know. "Sorry, he got the corner of an equipment cabinet in the head. He hasn't come to yet."

The officer turned and gave the sergeant a sidelong look. The noncom shook his head slightly. "I see." And Wil was afraid that he really did. The major's mouth settled into a thin line. He said something to the noncom, then walked back to the cars.

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Wil turned back to the other displays. It was a matter of seconds now. That major was more than suspicious. And without the satellite transmitter, Brierson didn't have a chance of reaching East Lansing or even using the loudmouth channels. The only comm links he had that didn't go through enemy nodes were the local phone bands. He could just reach Topeka Met. They would understand what he was talking about. Even if they wouldn't cooperate, they would surely pass the message back to headquarters. He ran the local directory. A second passed and he was looking at a narrowband black and white image. A young, good-looking male sat behind an executive-sized desk. He smiled dazzlingly and said, "Topeka Meteorological Service, Customer Relations. May I help you?"

"I sure hope so. My name's Brierson, Michigan State Police." Wil found the words tumbling out, as if he had been rehearsing this little speech for hours. The idea was simple, but there were some details. When he finished, he noticed the major coming back toward the van. One of his men carried comm gear.

The receptionist at Topeka Met frowned delicately. "Are you one of our customers, sir?"

"No, damn it. Don't you watch the news? You got four hundred tanks coming down Old70 toward Topeka. You're being invaded, man - as in *going out of business!*"

The young man shrugged in a way that indicated he never bothered with the news. "A gang invading Topeka? Sir, we are a city, not some farm community. In any case, what you want us to do with our tornado killers is clearly improper. It would be -"

"Listen," Wil interrupted, his voice placating, almost frightened. "At least send this message on to the Michigan State Police. Okay?"

The other smiled the same dazzling, friendly smile that had opened the conversation. "Certainly, sir." And Wil realized he had lost. He was talking to a moron or a low-grade personality simulator, it didn't matter much which. Topeka Met was like a lot of companies - it operated with just enough efficiency to stay in business. Damn the luck.

The voices from the exterior pickup were faint but clear, " -whoever they are, they're transmitting over the local

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phone bands, sir." It was an enlisted man talking to the New Mexican major. The major nodded and stepped toward the van.

This was it. No time left to think. Wil stabbed blindly at the directory. The Topeka Met Customer Relations "expert" disappeared and the screen began blinking a ring pattern.

"All right, Mr. Strong," the major was shouting again, loudly enough so that he could be heard through the hull of the van as well as over the pickup. The officer held a communications headset. "The President is on this line, sir. He wishes to speak with you . . . right now." There was a grim smile on the New Mexican's face.

Wil's fingers flick across the control board; the van's exterior mike gave a loud squawk and was silent. With one part of his mind, he heard the enlisted man say, "They're still transmitting, Major."

And then the ring pattern vanished from the phone display. Last chance. Even an auto answerer might be enough. The screen lit up, and Wil found himself staring at - a five year-old girl.

"Trask residence," she looked a little intimidated by Wil's hulking, scowling image. But she spoke clearly, as one who has been coached in the proper response to strangers. Those serious brown eyes reminded Brierson of his own sister. Bounded by what she knew and what she understood, she would try to do what was right.

It took a great effort to relax his face and smile at the girl. "Hello. Do you know how to record my call, Miss?" She nodded.

"Would you do that and show it to your parents, please?"

"Okay." She reached offscreen. The recording telltale gleamed at the corner of the flat, and Wil began talking. Fast.

The major's voice came over the external pickup: "Open it up, Sergeant." There were quick footsteps and something slapped against the hatch.

"Will!" Big Al grabbed his shoulder. "Get down. Away from the hatch. Those are slug guns they have out there!"

But Brierson couldn't stop now. He pushed Al away, waved for him to get down among the fallen New Mexicans.

The explosion was a sharp cracking sound that rocked the van sideways. The phone connection held, and Wil kept talk

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ing. Then the door fell - or was pulled - outward and daylight splashed across him.

"Get away from that phone!"

On the display, the little girl seemed to look past Wil. Her eyes widened. She was the last thing W. W. Brierson saw.

There were dreams. In some he could only see. In others, he was blind, yet hearing and smell were present, all mixed together. And some were pure pain, winding up and up while all around him torturers twisted screws and needles to squeeze the last bit of hurt from his shredded flesh. But he also sensed his parents and sister Beth, quiet and near. And sometimes when he could see and the pain was gone, there were flowers - almost a jungle of them - dipping near his eyes, smelling of violin music.

Snow. Smooth, pristine, as far as his eyes could see. Trees glazed in ice that sparkled against cloudless blue sky. Wil raised his hand to rub his eyes and felt faint surprise to see the hand obey, to feel hand touch face as he willed it.

"Wili, Wili! You're really back!" Someone warm and dark rushed in from the side. Tiny arms laced around his neck. "We knew you'd come back. But it's been so long." His five year-old sister snuggled her face against him.

As he lowered his arm to pat her head, a technician came around from behind him. "Wait a minute, honey. Just because his eyes are open doesn't mean he's back. We've gotten that far before." Then he saw the grin on Wil's face, and his eyes widened a bit. "L-Lieutenant Brierson! Can you understand me?" Wil nodded, and the tech glanced over his head - probably at some diagnostic display. Then he smiled, too. "You do understand me! Just a minute, I'm going to get my supervisor. Don't touch anything." He rushed out of the room, his last words more an unbelieving mumbling to himself than anything else: "I was beginning to wonder if we'd ever get past protocol rejection."

Beth Brierson looked up at her brother. "Are you okay, now, Wili?"

Wil wiggled his toes, and *felt* them wiggle. He certainly felt okay. He nodded. Beth stepped back from the bed. "I want to go get Mom and Dad."

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Wil smiled again. "I'll be right here waiting."

Then she was gone, too. Brierson glanced around the room and recognized the locale of several of his nightmares.

But it was an ordinary hospital room, perhaps a little heavy on electronics.

. . . and still he was not alone in it. Alvin Swensen, dressed as offensively as ever, sat in the shadows next to the window. Now he stood up and crossed the room to shake hands.

Wil grunted. "My own parents aren't here to greet me, yet Big Al is."

"Your bad luck. If you'd had the courtesy to come around the first time they tried to bring you back, you would have had your family, and half MSP waiting for you. You were a hero."
"Were?"

"Oh, you still are, Wil. But it's been a while, you know." There was a crooked smile on his face.

Brierson looked through the window at the bright winter's day. The land was familiar. He was back in Michigan, probably at Okemos Central Medical. But Beth didn't look much older. "Around six months, I'd guess."

Big Al nodded. "And, no, I haven't been sitting here every day watching your face for some sign of life. I happened to be in East Lansing today. My Protection Racket still has some insurance claims against your company. MSP paid off all the big items quick, but some of the little things - bullet holes in outbuildings, stuff like that - they're dragging their heels on. Anyway, I thought I'd drop by and . . . see how you're doing."

"Hmm. So you're not saluting the New Mexican flag down there in Manhattan?"

"What? Hell no, we're not!" Then Al seemed to remember who he was talking to. "Look, Wil, in a few minutes you're gonna have the medical staff in here patting themselves on the back for pulling off another medical miracle, and your family will be right on top of that. And after that, your Colonel Potts will fill you in again on everything that's happened. Do you really want Al Swensen's Three Minute History of the Great Plains War?"

Wil nodded.

"Okay." Big Al moved his chair close to the bed. "The New

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Mexicans pulled back from the ungoverned lands less than three days after they grabbed you and me and Jim Turner" The official Republic view was that the Great plains Action was a victory for the decisive and restrained use of military force. The "roving gangster bands" of the ungoverned wastes had been punished for their abuse of New Mexican settlers, and one W. W. Brierson, the ringleader of the northern criminals, had been killed.
q Im, dead?" said Wil.

"Dead enough for their purposes." Big Al seemed momentarily uneasy. "I don't know whether I should tell a sick man how much sicker he once was - but you got hit in the back of the head with a five-millimeter exploder. The Newmex didn't hurt me or Jim, so I don't think it was vengeance. But when they blew in the door, there you were, doing something with their command equipment. They were already hurting, and they didn't have any stun guns, I guess."

A five-millimeter exploder. Wil knew what they could do. He should be dead. If it hit near the neck, there might be some forebrain tissue left, but the front of his face would have been blown out. He touched his nose wonderingly.

Al saw the motion. "Don't worry. You're as beautiful as ever. But at the time, you looked very dead - even to their best medics. They popped you into stasis. The three of us spent nearly a month in detention in Oklahoma. When we were `repatriated,' the people at Okemos Central didn't have any trouble growing back the front of your face. Maybe even the New Mexicans could do that. The problem is, you're missing a chunk of brain," he made patted the back of his head. "**That** they couldn't grow back. So they replaced it with processing equipment, and tried to interface that with what was left."

Wil experienced a sudden, chilling moment of introspection. He really should be dead. Could this all be in the imagination of some damned prosthesis program?

Al saw his face, and looked stricken. "Honest, Wil, it wasn't **that** large a piece. Just big enough to fool those dumbass New Mexicans."

The moment passed and Brierson almost chuckled. If self-awareness were suspect, there could scarcely be certainty of anything.

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"Okay. So the New Mexican incursion was a great success. Now tell me why they really left. Was it simply the Schwartz bomb?"

"I think that was part of it." Even with the nuke, the casualties had not been high. Only the troops and tankers within three or four thousand meters of the blast were killed - perhaps twenty-five hundred men. This was enormous by the standards Wil was used to, but not by the measure of the Water Wars. Overall, the New Mexicans could claim that it had been an "inexpensive" action.

But the evidence of casual acceptance of nuclear warfare, all the way down to the level of an ordinary farmer, was terrifying to the New Mexican brass. Annexing the Midwest would be like running a gradeschool where the kids carry slug guns. They probably didn't realize that Schwartz would have been lynched the first time he stepped off his property if his neighbors had realized beforehand that he was nuke-armed.

"But I think your little phone call was just as important."

"About using the tornado killers?"

"Yeah. It's one thing to step on a rattlesnake - and another to suddenly realize you're up to your ankles in 'em. I bet the weather services have equipped hundreds of farms with killers - all the way from Okemos to Greeley." And, as Wil had realized on that summer day when last he was truly conscious, a tornado killer is essentially an aerial torpedo. Their use was coordinated by the meteorological companies, which paid individual farmers to house them. During severe weather alerts, coordinating processors at a met service headquarters monitored remote sensors, and launched killers from appropriate points in the countryside. Normally, they would be airborne for minutes, but they could loiter for hours. When remote sensing found a twister, the killers came in at the top of the funnel, generated a fifty-meter bobble - and destabilized the vortex.

Take that loiter capability, make trivial changes in the flight software - and you have a weapon capable of flying hundreds of kilometers and delivering a one tonne payload with pinpoint accuracy. "Even without nukes they're pretty fearsome. Especially if used like you suggested."

Wil shrugged. Actually, the target he had suggested was

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the usual one when dealing with marauding gangs. Only the scale was different.

"You know the Trasks - that family you called right at the end? Bill Trask's brother rents space for three killers to Topeka Met. They stole one of them and did just like you said. The news services had spotted Martinez's location; the Trasks flew the killer right into the roof of the mansion he and his staff were using down in Oklahoma. We got satellite pics of what happened. Those New Mexican big shots came storming out of there like ants in a meth fire." Even now, months later, the memory made Big Al laugh. "Bill Trask told me he painted something like 'Hey, hey Hastings, the next one is for real!' on the fuselage. I bet even yet, their top people are living under concrete, wondering whether to keep their bobble suppressors up or down.

"But they got the message. Inside of twelve hours, their troops were moving back south and they were starting to talk about their statesmanship and the lesson they had taught

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Wil started to laugh, too. The room shimmered colorfully in time with his laughter. It was not painful, but it was disconcerting enough to make him stop. "Good. So we didn't need those bums from Topeka Met."

"Right. Fact is, they had me arrest the Trasks for theft. But when they finally got their corporate head out of the dirt, they dropped charges and tried to pretend it had been their idea all along. Now they're modifying their killers and selling the emergency control rights."

Far away (he remembered the long hallways at Okemos Central), he heard voices. And none familiar. Damn. The medics were going to get to him before his family. Big Al heard the commotion, too. He stuck his head out the door, then said to Wil, "Well, Lieutenant, this is where I dessert, You know the short version, anyway." He walked across the room to pick up his data set.

Wil followed him with his eyes. "So it all ended for the best, except. . ." except *for all those poor New Mexican souls caught under a light brighter than any Kansas sun, except for.*

Kiki and Schwartz. I wish they could know how thing turned out."

Big Al stopped halfway to the door, a surprised look on hi

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face. "Kiki and Jake? One is too smart to die and the other is too mean! She knew Jake would thump her for bringing the New Mexicans across his land. She and my boys were way underground long before he wiped off: And Jake was dug in even deeper.

"Hell, Wil, they're even bigger celebrities than you are! Old Jake has become the Midwest's pop armadillo. None of us ever guessed, least of all him: he *enjoys* being a public person. He and Kiki have buried the hatchet. Now they're talking about a world-wide club for armadillos. They figure if one can stop an entire nation state, what can a bunch of them do? You know: 'Make the world safe for the ungoverned.'

Then he was gone. Wil had just a moment to chew on the problems van Steen and Schwartz would cause the Michigan State Police before the triumphant med techs crowded into his room.

END INTERLUDE