

DAVID J. MORRIS

The Counterfactualist

That's just not the way the world really works anymore," he continued. "We're an empire now, and when we act, we create our own reality. And while you're studying that reality—judiciously, as you will—we'll act again, creating other new realities, which you can study too, and that's how things will sort out. We're history's actors...and you, all of you, will be left to just study what we do.

—unnamed advisor to President Bush, *New York Times*, October, 2004

My understanding is that the program is to be terminated. The Defense Department is supposed to be imaginative, but it sounds like maybe they got too imaginative with the online terrorist futures market plan.

—Paul Wolfowitz, Deputy Secretary of Defense, in testimony to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, July, 2005

I

Lost and yet not lost, adrift in his room of theories, in some computer file or folder, in cabinets of data so densely packed that at times they seemed in danger of igniting spontaneously, Yarmo kept a roster of the dead. A printout of the names of associates and enablers, handlers and housers, persons gone to dust who tracked back to the shadow known as Ahmed Ajaj al-Dardiri, prodigal of the Al-Khalayleh

tribe, Antichrist of the Occupation, imposter of corpses, insurgent mastermind. It was a full-time job keeping track of the various *noms de guerre* that insurgents went by, so many of them confirmed dead, cooling on slabs in Charlie Med, only to have them materialize again in slightly modified form, almost as if one Dardiri were being killed off and another brought in to replace him, over and over. It was enough to make him wonder how many of them weren't the result of bad intel but OGA creations, to use the current *nom* of the Central Intelligence Agency. Now it appeared as if someone, or more properly, some agency, had put a bomb into the house of Dardiri and killed him, or at least the latest version of him.

"They got him, sir. They got Elvis," Capa an analyst from StratFuse said when he came to roust Yarmo. Yarmo lived and worked in a long metal fire retardant trailer marked 808, with a view of the camp shitters across a wide field of gravel trucked in from Jordan. The incongruously-*nom*'ed camp that he called home and rarely left, and then only if, and only if, something irresistible called out to him, was called Avalanche Point, an image that figured in Yarmo's nightmares. "Word just came down. Blipped him out near Baquba. D-boys had him in a house, called in a section of F-16s. Looks solid."

"Media been told yet?" Yarmo asked.

"Nope. Clock's ticking but still time, sir." Capa managed to put an air-traffic controller beat into it, the vocal equivalent of a hard nudge which danced on the borders of insubordination with a degree of exactitude that Yarmo, even in his diminished state was able to appreciate. In truth, the corporal was only following orders: Yarmo had instructed Capa to fetch him, no matter the hour, if anything so much as a close call befell his cherished Dardiri. Yarmo liked to think of himself as something of detective, an odd sort of martial gumshoe and like the hotel dicks of old, he was now obliged to go visit the crime scene, such as it was.

He pulled on his trousers, rolled up both legs, cinched the cuffs dramatically, the affirmative gesture seeming to jog him from the parody of sleep from which he had emerged. Then he and Capa both turned and looked at the closet, where a nine-mil in a shoulder holster dangled and doubled itself in front of a mirror bolted to the back wall. It was an ancient piece of glass, likely mid-Baathist, rich with ripples and waves that warped and bent the shape of the Beretta into a piece of Victorian era plumbing. Capa, a tightly-wound in mind and body young corporal from Upstate who had early on taken a near-motherly interest in Yarmo and seeing no other qualified parties had designated himself his batman, went for the piece and handed it to the major. Helped him slip it over his head, then stepped back,

watched him send his arm ponderously through the leather hoop of the arm strap and buckle it next to the ribs, patting the piece almost ceremonially.

“I hated to wake you, sir, ‘cept I know you never sleep.” he said.

“I sleep,” Yarmo said, cinching his belt. “I sleep all the time. It’s just that I do it with my eyes open.” Capa had a point. Yarmo killed his days in-country surrounded by books in his trailer, making notes, sifting through documents and virtual mountains of data. Sometimes it felt as if he were being buried alive. It was a daily struggle to keep a path clear between desk and air-conditioner, air-conditioner and closet, closet and door. He took meals at his desk, the night usually finding him curled up on a Persian rug on the floor and sliding into the twilight approximation of slumber for which he’d enjoyed a well-earned minor celebrity in ROTC, intermittently surfacing mid-lecture mumbling pastiches involving Clausewitz and offensive football theory, the hurry-up versus Boyd’s OODA loop, but in-country he had grown fond of letting his eyes glaze over the intricacies of the rug while his digits journeyed deep into the loom, like emissaries gone awry.

As a Ziploc of Humboldt county was to a pothead, as an empty line-up pumping two-to-three foot overhead with a steady offshore was to a surfer, so was the making of intelligence to Yarmo. If you were to examine his dossier, you would quickly encounter the term “counterfactualist.” If you were to look closer you would see that he was considered a “sensitive” of some kind, a dowser in the world of strategic thought. His job was to manufacture alternative operational realities. An Iraq where WMDs had been found. An Iraq policed entirely by an American mercenary force. An Iraq broken up into three, four and seven sovereign states. An “Irak” whose borders conformed to the original Arab conception of it at the Damascus conference of 1917. In all of his fictions, he encountered a point where the original reality left off and a new one began—a Reality A and a Reality B. Somewhere in the gap between the two realities was a murky region of possibility that Command felt to be of tremendous value. At a certain level, all intelligence was a matter of the imagination.

He was, in point of fact, the first of his kind. When he’d first suggested the creation of such an occupational specialty to the generals at Centcom, they’d been quick to sense the potential and it had been a fast hit within the intelligence community, a descriptor that never failed to give Yarmo a chuckle every time he thought it, let alone spoke it aloud, as he was occasionally required to at TerrorCon and various other Beltway symposia.

American intelligence was so very many things but a *community* it most certainly was not.

On his desk, Yarmo kept two laptops, one of which represented his most recent foray into speculative intelligence, a thing that some in the private sector had begun to talk about as the first firm gesture toward a unified field theory of war: the TERRORIST Futures Market. An attempt to commoditize the global operational environment, the market functioned as a open web portal; anyone could log on and buy shares in an anticipated terror event, or actor, or weapons system, the idea being that all the knowledge in the world was out there, looking for a data point to condense on. The way Yarmo looked at it, it was like any manila folder you kept, once you wrote a title across the top, it was like a call went out into the world. The material just started flowing into it. Almost like it was waiting for the file to be opened. The market had, thus far, proved occasionally useful but mostly it was a fascinating thought experiment with limited practical value. It had, for instance, failed to predict most of Dardiri's putative deaths, despite the fact that his stock had been trading at a high volume recently and a number of the special operators tasked to kill him were known to be active traders.

It was well known that Dardiri was a fictional person—his genealogy and tribal past didn't quite add up—but how exactly far the fiction went was anyone's guess. It was as if the war itself had made him: next to nothing was known about Dardiri's life before the war apart from the fact that he was thought to have come from one of Jordan's most storied tribes, the Khalayleh, a tribe rumored to have Illuminati-like tentacles reaching across greater Arabia. There hung over the man a sense of buffering, an insulation with that weird whiff of studied ambiguity, of which Command had of late become deeply enamored, deploying it as a Zen-like hedge against the prying eyes of journalists and inquisitors of all stripes, almost as if to say, "where there is no smoke..." in a similar way that Command never discussed with any specificity its nuclear first-strike policy. It was one of those things you could never date but at some point the lessons of Lewinsky had been internalized by the Pentagon and a fog of plausible deniability could be seen hanging over an increasing number of operations.

For a data-addict the likes of Yarmo, such caginess had the opposite of the desired effect and he had noticed a curious lack of the usual documentary intensity with respect to Elvis, like an artistically rendered black and white photograph, a gauziness that the photographer had purposely built into the composition. This model allowed for the Dardiri figure, whatever his real name, to be employed for a variety of official aims, a fact that Yarmo implicitly understood, characteristically, to the point of knowing it without knowing that he knew it.

Yarmo put his hand on Capa's shoulder, and they went to go call on the dead. "Days like this, I get an attack of the funny feelings..." Capa said as he led Yarmo through the darkness toward a waiting Humvee or KAMIONO, as the small stenciled letters over the passenger side door put it. When the Stratfuse cell had been stood up the year before, higher-ups had, in an uncharacteristic fit of broadmindedness, seen fit to staff it with a smorgasbord of law school dropouts, amateur philologists, chess junkies and grad school gypsies (Capa being a statistics graduate on more or less permanent leave from SUNY Binghamton) and many of its internal memoranda, intelligence summaries and notices were printed on official letterhead in Ido, a stripped-down, re-carbureted version of Esperanto. It was the sort of aggressively obscure humor that the cell took as its trademark, delighting in the head-shaking exasperation it produced in their uniformed brethren.

"So many times we just about collar the motherfucker and then this once, on no good intel, no good market indicators, we get him? You familiar with the line, 'Just because you're paranoid, don't mean that they're not out to get you'?"

He admitted that the expression rang a bell. Yarmo, in fact, liked to think of himself as something of a paranoia artist, looking on his occasional delusions and aggressive mis-ordering of the facts as something like dispatches from some distant, poorly-reconned, unconscious Area of Operations.

"Most of the guys who have that said about them don't deserve it, if you know what I mean," Capa said. "Most people have no reason to be paranoid but they still worry. Over here, guys got all the reason in the world but most I know worry less over here than at home, at least outside of the cell. I don't know, forget it, I just get feelings sometimes."

"Funny feelings. They're going around right now," Yarmo said, checking to make sure he had his black pad and digital camera with him. The notes he jotted were almost always superfluous, as his ex-wife had told him. Yarmo was cursed with an almost unbearably rich memory and the physical act of writing, seemed to hint at the possibility of forgetting and grant him a certain measure of peace, a rare commodity in a place like Iraq. His rare mastery of the facts was, in fact, the chief difficulty of his existence. It inspired his insomnia and did dark wonders in company, making others nervous, as they knew that his memory was always working, like a record needle journeying forever in its groove, it kept going. For most people, failures of recall, lacunae, the intricate Swiss-cheese-ing of the mind was a blessing, a means of escape from the burden of everyday trivia, and for soldiers in particular, forgetting was something of an art form, a way of insuring one's sanity. The finer

points of selective amnesia had somehow escaped Yarmo. “We oughta set up a phone tip-line for every Joe in-country who gets himself a funny feeling.”

On the way to Baquba, Yarmo sat silent and listened as the guys in the Kamiono bantered back and forth. As if auditioning for a Sunday morning talk show, they talked fast and without thinking, rarely allowing a sentence to be finished. The talk was all about the demise of Dardiri and What It All Meant. How it would play back home. How long it would take before it appeared in presidential remarks, what impact it would have on the insurgency, the modus operandi of viruses as compared to an open-source insurgency like the one in Iraq and so on. Nobody really knew anything yet but all the same they all talked with great positiveness and strategic insight.

The Stratfuse guys were a bunch of fan boys who had traded their comic books in for INTSUMs, stopped gaming for fun and started gaming for real. Given clearance and told to make intel from whatever they could find, the cell had in little time turned from a motley group with a mission into a separate subculture with an obsession whose frontiers kept expanding. And Stratfuse denizens being what they were, namely intellectual-mischief hounds unable to sit still even in the middle of an honest-to-God shooting match, ever waiting for Daddy to come along and end the fun, had established not long after their arrival in-country, an alternate fellowship of ne-er-do-wells, i.e. “The Society,” as in The Society for the Appreciation of alternative Dentistry, or SAD, since as Sergeant Sapindale seated in the Kamiono in front of Yarmo, had explained, “That’s all that’s left of us in the end, sir, if we get dead over here or back in the real world—teeth—dental artifacts, filings, porcelain chips and amalgam for some chump in forensics to parse, like some ancient Mayan codex.”

It scared Yarmo going to the SAD workspace, sometimes. He would go in and look at the sets of dentures they all seemed to have and like always, he found his imagination slipping away from him, out into the ether making connections he wasn’t prepared for. Teeth and metal, they last forever.

2

Five checkpoints preceded their arrival at the kill site. At each, four snuffies with rifles peered suspiciously into the Kamiono. After the third one, Yarmo, who the sentries were curiously referring to as “Doc,” began to think that the special operations task force chasing Elvis, the palindromically-nommed 626, was playing a practical joke on them and on him in particular, giving him flashbacks to his

short-lived pre-ROTC marijuana days, suddenly he was quite sure that the dental cult was in on it, too.

After the fifth VCP he told the driver to stop, please. He stepped out of the vehicle and a faceless sentry, appearing out of the gloom told him to walk ahead in the darkness about three hundred meters until he came upon some soldiers digging through some rubble. That was the actual kill site.

As he headed up the road, the smell of blasted clay and high explosive filled his nostrils. It was a fact of the war that practically no event on the ground went unobserved, unprocessed. Within the Sunni Triangle in particular, the level of surveillance became for the pathologically-reclusive Yarmo close to suffocating. The sky overhead contained an invisible world of satellites, unmanned drones and surveillance aircraft, forming with the ground sensors and vid-cams, a monstrous three-dimensional grid that consumed the world, converting it all on some level into binary code, long strings of ones and zeros, on and off, alive and dead.

He heard a drone and for a moment he had a vision of himself bathed in the green light of its night vision scope. He walked and felt the location and targeting information from his warm body as banners of numerals fluttering off of his body being processed by crews thousands of miles away. There were two of him now. One real and walking. The other an image, also walking. He knew, too, that in transit through the network's synapses he had been necessarily made and re-made countless times, the endless doubling of his image becoming almost incestuous. At times like this, his skin began to itch and he grew uncharacteristically irritable at this multiplication. It was irrational he knew. It was, in fact, this very information that he needed to do his job. But in early moments outside of his trailer he often felt this way, the data emerging from every object in his field of vision, as if it had managed to replace all things terrestrial. Hence it assailed not only his eyes but his ears; as he walked he experienced the information as alive in its own way, almost as if the numbers were taking over the world itself, unable any longer to contain its greed for the tangible world. Not any longer.

He wondered if other guys experienced the war in this way, or was it particular to his identity as a counterfactualist, a freakish effect of his ability, his *need* to see alternate versions of reality at the same time. Intriguing question, he thought, but who could he compare notes with? He loathed his fellow counterfactuals, or C-Facts, as they called themselves, or "*contra*-factuals" as some of them liked to joke. There were almost fifty of them now, working in cells in all the various combatant commands around the globe. He might have invented his occupational field but he felt no need to take part in it in any larger sense. It was a job, in truth,

that he had created out of pure selfish impulse, as a way to escape the grinding staff work of intelligence, as an edifice to house his natural obsessions and for his peers (the SAD crew excepted), he nursed a certain revulsion, as if there were something genetically-defective about them.

The kill site itself was shaped like an amphitheater dug into the earth with rows of piled rubble where the seats should have been. Sitting atop a small pyramid of debris on the edge of the crater, Yarmo looked down at the stage area and watched as a group of soldiers worked silently in the ruins, collecting what seemed like randomly-selected bits of concrete and placing them into suitcase-sized Ziploc bags. A single T-shaped klieg light illuminated the area. Behind the light-stand was an enormous dropcloth held up by scaffolding which seemed to have been erected to contain the light spilling out over the scene. Behind the scaffolding was a line of palm trees that in the darkness looked like wildly Afro'd giants and Yarmo thought to himself that they hadn't much time before some of the local *muj* woke up and started dropping mortar rounds on them. As he watched the men, it struck him again how quiet they were. There was none of the normal soldierly grouching that is so common in the ranks that it comes to seem a birthright.

"What're you doing out here, Doc? You come out to see how the other half lives, or should I say, dies? How'd you get past security, anyhow? I left, I must say, rather pointed instructions not to let any hippie scum inside the cordon." It was Sumo, aka Sumo Simpson, sergeant first class, famed Delta shooter and special ops trophy hunter. Named for his freakish size which bordered on the NFL-esque, Sumo was like most 626 guys in his barely-restrained contempt for non-shooters and other "non-essential personnel" and intel types figured prominently into this anti-panthreon. Owing perhaps to his poetic demeanor, Sumo had, at some point in the dim bellicose past, began to look upon Yarmo as something like his special project and, incongruously associated him with whatever Sixties stereotypes existed in his twisted martial imagination, referring to Yarmo unerringly as "Doc," even though as he'd taken pains to point out, a Master's in history from Johns Hopkins did not qualify him for such an honorific. By design or not, the nickname had become a sort of pos-rep for Sumo. When people began calling Yarmo "Doc," he knew Sumo couldn't be far off. Sumo had done a tour as an interrogator-trainer at the Army's SERE school at Fort Bragg, a school that Yarmo had been forcibly enrolled in as a young captain, spending a sleepless week hallucinating inside a three-by-three foot cell while Sumo and his pals cycled tapes of babies wailing over the PA and occasionally, when they got bored enough, waterboarded his fellow inmates, using a garden hose and a rusting Stokes litter. Somehow Yarmo had escaped that final

degradation, not that that gave him any peace. Whenever he looked at Simpson, he caught a flash of that week, not an image or a flashback so much as a convulsion down in the lizard part of his brain followed by a rush of heat to his face. It was as if he were a comrade and an enemy at the same time, in much the same way that he was able to see two distinct realities and their points of departure, he was able to see two Sumoes.

“Well, if it isn’t the local Birch Society rep.” Yarmo said. “You here running a protective detail for Nixon’s ghost?”

“Don’t kid yourself, Doc, I’ve transcended the whole political sphere and you know it,” he said, pointing to his impressively-barnacled weapon, “by virtue of this.”

Despite his professed love of secrecy and all his professional training in hiding-and-seeking, Sumo loved attention and harbored pathologic show-biz ambitions. On his leaves, he served as a technical advisor on various Hollywood war productions and had maintained a SAG card since before the towers fell. He seemed to have carte blanche with the art departments of said productions and over the years his kit had become more like a rolling commentary on military gear, a speculative study on what a soldier of the future might look like. Perhaps owing to his Hollywood time, Sumo had developed a killer instinct for being where the action was, always, almost as if in his mind, his life and career which were functionally inseparable anyway, had come to comprise a series of marks for an invisible, omnipresent cameraman, which come to think of it, wasn’t really that far from the truth when you took the drones into account.

“Oh, Sumo when you gonna learn that guns never solve anything?” he said.

“Where’s the stiff anyway?” Yarmo asked, almost as an afterthought.

“Charlie Med. Dude still had some kick left in ’im when we loaded him onto the bird. He’s dead as he’s gonna get now though.”

“The fuck happened here, anyway?”

“We caught a break, Doc. The fuck? You sound almost disappointed.” he replied, his voice trailing off melodramatically. “Seems our new, improved ‘gator techniques are finally starting to pay off, no thanks to your better-red-than-dead, shall I say, *comrades* over at the *Times*.”

Yarmo watched his face. What kind of SERE game was he running on him now? Despite his paranoid instincts, Yarmo wanted to believe him, at least on something, but he knew this business was unforgiving and that the closer you got to 626, the more moody, fickle, the more, fuck, *bipolar* the truth seemed to get. There were penny stock-rumors of Simpson-Elvis meet ups in Amman, even Haifa, but as soon as these trades had been transacted, they’d disappeared off the Market completely.

Simpson had tried several times to bring Yarmo into the fold, futilely offering him a locker of his more experimental kit in exchange for insider tips, stock picks about where certain sheiks-in-exile were holed-up, whose cousins were working for Al Qaeda, what the market thought about this and that. Practically any operational notion could be marketized and saturation in the Sunni areas was known to be good. Each time Yarmo denied him, Sumo grew furious. ("It's all barter-town around here, you rat-fucker! Tell me what you want!")

"Take a break, Sumo. You don't gotta be a dick every day of your life."

"Haha, Doc, remind me to laugh when the war is over," he replied gamely.

"Was it really the Customer here? You've been working him for months, word around the campfire was that you even had the man in custody in Fallujah for a few hours and did the old catch-and-release on him. I mean what gives? And now you expect me to believe, you just blow him up, out of the big blue? It just doesn't add up." Yarmo was leaning into it now, his frustration boiling over. "You're at half-mast just thinking about doing a hit on his house. I know you, Sumo. You've spent months waiting to see the look on his flashlit face when you rolled him up. Without Dardiri your life has no meaning."

"Lemme get this straight, you think Dardiri was a fake?"

"A stalking horse. A deception op. A false flag. A potted plant strategically-placed to see who might happen along and water it. You pick the nomenclature, Sumo. It wouldn't take much. A fake passport, a stolen Diners Club card, an email address, all of them leading back to Dardiri."

"So, in your pot-addled little brain, who's behind it all?"

"Who knows. DIA? The Lincoln Group? Omnicept?" Yarmo said, name-dropping a Beltway public relations firm in the American employ that was known to feed stories into the international press. "Maybe there's two Elvises, or a dozen of them. One for real and on the payroll and others that you place where you need them, when you need them."

"You go off your meds this week, Doc? I'm a little busy for your dope fiend hallucinations right now, if you don't mind, though I know that Dardiri has become quite the muse for you of late."

It was back at full strength, that force field of disdain that with Sumo hovered ever-ready just over his head and which deployed whenever it was no longer convenient to talk, or when he no longer cared for the drift of the conversation. It was hard at times like this not to see this contempt cultivated to its coming perfection, not to see the Sumo of ten years-on: the cynical and burnt-out old Commando in Exile, acting out a parody of retirement on a beach in Central America, petrified that the

phone that would never ring again, that there was no job waiting for him down the line. Sumo spoke something that could've been gibberish into his hand-mike and then disappeared into a nearby Humvee.

Yarmo stood looking into the crater for a long time. Of course, he'd seen this sort of thing before, he'd visited other kill sites, had other opportunities to view the destruction in its purest form, places where the carnage was manageably visible, seemingly stage-set and where the brain could actually wrap itself around the concept of the war, see it at its most elemental. A few hours before, what he was looking at had been matter organized into a usable shape, a home that someone, a family could have lived in, raised their kids in. Now it was debris, the force of entropy that the war represented on some level, having reached it and done its work.

Yarmo was there for awhile, trying to picture the noise and the heat that preceded the scene before him, the planes twisting in the air far overhead, the pilots talking on the radio. He tried to imagine the scene from the gun camera of the plane, the thing taking on an almost human intelligence, like a giant unblinking eye, watching a bomb sailed noiselessly into the house. Then the flash washing out the frame for a moment.

He stood there squinting, unable to make the picture work. At times like this, bereft of the blast, the wreckage seemed to have always been there, pre-rubbed. As an experiment, he tried to see if he could make himself believe that this was true, even though he knew that it wasn't, just for the practice. This fantasy shambled on its own momentum for a long time. Yarmo mused that this was his job, investing in the impossible and as his mind became progressively unhinged, began to see this tangle of concrete, in its own way, as being trapped within the house, waiting like a sculpture to be released by the force of the bomb. After some time, this paradigm broke down and he realized that he had driven all this way for nothing. There was nothing here to see. In vain, he extended his arm melodramatically, like a dowser reaching out to the crater, trying to get something, *anything* from the wreckage before him. Almost immediately, a flush of shame filled his face but before he could withdraw his arm, Capa appeared at his side.

"Sheesh, you scared me," Yarmo said. The pair of them walked back to where the line of trucks waited. The whole SAD crew, all of them with headlamps on and looking like a coal mining rescue squad lamenting the most recent collapse, were crowded around a chess match unfolding on the hood of one of the Kamionos, a sight which gave Yarmo a start. Sapindale was playing against an Iraqi soldier who was smiling too much probably because he was nervous about being around so

many Americans. His beleaguered Kalashnikov was leaned against the Kamiono tire and looked at first like a kickstand propping up the entire contraption.

“What is this, tryouts for the 626 chess club?”

“Sorry, sir. Lahib here is schooling me in a local variant of the game, maybe you’ve heard of it?” Sapindale said.

“What, *shatranj*?”

“That’s the one. Forgot you played, sir.”

“My play is weak,” Yarmo said. “I have no feel for the deep game.” Hinting at the regular-like-clockwork panic that gripped him a few moves into any chess game when inevitably he would be overwhelmed by the pieces and the endless possibilities that gameplay represented. The game being, of course, an analog for war, it pained him that his play had never developed.

“It’s pretty much all deep game, isn’t it, sir?” Sapindale said idly as he snapped a picture of the board for posterity with his digital camera, in the hope that they could, at some point, pick up their game where they’d left off.

“Tell me something I don’t know, Sap. Tell me something I don’t know.”

3

The SAD crew, as if animated by Elvis’s seeming demise, wound like a clock’s mainspring by the events of the evening, seeking some easing of its own internal tension, some equilibrium, decided halfway back to Avalanche Point to turn around and swing by the Green Zone and sneak into the Rasheed Hotel, the upscale civilian lodge for a breakfast appropriate to the gravity of their situation. The city was hard asleep, but choppers thrummed overhead and large trucks were plowing through the deserted streets with water, empty sandbags, diesel generators, tires and razor wire, with and without trailers, with and without tank escort, full of anything and everything that a war needs to run, the subtle city war inside the war renewing itself for another day. At times like this, Yarmo thought of himself as something like a white blood cell, tumbling along in the bloodstream, waiting for the call that would inevitably come. The Kamiono’s dim running lights were on and the truck ran slow and heavy through the dusty streets. Twenty yards ahead of every truck ran a scout truck with rollers and an electrified wire designed to set off any bombs buried beneath the road.

“Chow,” Sapindale was saying underneath Dick Dale’s surf guitar version of “Hava Nagila” which reverb’ed through the Kamiono’s sound system, “is all about theater. Chow tells us who we are. Chow is pure culture, the thing that separates us from the animals, reminds us where we stand on the food chain. I walk into

the DFAC at Rustimayah and what do I see? I see New York versus Chicago-style, I see?" It seemed to have turned into a question momentarily. "...a Black Hawk carved from ice, National Guardsmen fresh off the plane from Kansas, enjoying some soft-serve while contemplating the mysteries of mixed martial on the telly ten time zones from home. No chilluns, Elvis or no Elvis, we have this morn passed some threshold and destiny herself demands that we dine accordingly."

Yarmo let him rave on. Sap (Washington, ABD, Philosophy) came from a lefty family from central Oregon and his childhood had been full of phone taps, tails, nondescript vehicles waiting down the block, unexplained blackouts and prolonged glances from across the middle school playground. By virtue of his background alone he was something of a kindred spirit to Yarmsy, whose cultivation of the eccentric was known throughout Centcom. Then one day after he'd been in-country for a little over a month, Sap had said something that had stopped him cold. "You know, sir, all my life it's been me trying to see around the next corner, one eye out for the Feds, wondering what the guy following me was going to look like, what kind of walk he'd have, if he'd be wearing one of those giant scuba-diving watches that can take your pulse from across the street. But I swear, over here for some reason, it's all backwards. It was like after I showed up and the worry just left me. Checked it like luggage at Saddam International. At first I thought it was just because there's just too much to think about. Like it burns your circuits out. But then I realized that wasn't it. Something else had changed. I wasn't looking for the prowler car anymore because there wasn't one for me. It was me. I was the guy in the car." After that Yarmo had tried to keep Sap around because the sergeant's antics made him feel normal by comparison, but more than that his conflicted agnosticism about the military rang true to Yarmo's inner compass, his perverse love of paradox, the Army being at once his life's highest calling and an oppressive force for evil.

Yarmo liked Sap enough that sometimes he would let him take charge of the patrol, trusting in his jaunty authority. In truth, Yarmo had never enjoyed the fruits of command, the simmering ego rush that drove his peers in the neverending race for more promotions and more authority. He enjoyed his work but being in charge bored and exhausted him and he was perfectly content to let Sap take over whenever his enthusiasm boiled over.

The entire drive through the mulhullahs of northeastern Baghdad, Sap had been waxing shamanic and, as if tuning into some secret theologic wavelength had, immediately after selecting the Dick Dale began outlining his unified field theory of the Antichrist and how if according to the Scripture, Satan knew Biblical prophecy but not the Lord's timing, it followed that he would have been forced to

keep an Antichrist alive in the world at every moment in history, so that there were at every epoch a series of near-Antichrists never brought to fruition, even now. As the Kamiono rolled along, Sapindale pointed out possible IED sites, usually noting them as they passed in retrospect in the Kamiono's rearview mirror, almost as if for posterity. If they were to die in the following moments, they would at least have an idea why.

"Oh, lookie, that patch over there might've worked for a one-five-five, don't you think, Yarmsy, I mean, sir?"

Sap was funny like that. His master's work had focused on the pre-Socratics and his dogtags advertised him as a Gnostic, but really he was just a theology junkie, a masochist, a guy called to the restraints of orthodoxy, that mingling of awe and comfort that comes with the knowledge of fixed stars, and Yarmo could practically see him being sucked into some nineteen fifties-style sci-fi tractor beam of Islam and its fatalistic "insh'allah" obsessions in particular. It was as if the more souls that could be implicated in his little thought experiment, the more power it took on.

"Hey, Sap, old boy, you think you might start, y'know, paying attention to the road? I mean aren't we rolling up on where those guys from the 101st got blown up last week?"

"Oh, right on, sir, no worries. See we sorta drafted my chess buddy Lahib into the Society," he said pointing to the lead vehicle, his paw resting on a dazzling acrylic denture set, rendered in iridescent red, white and blue that had been glued to the dash. "Dude's from Kerada, just around the corner, so he knows these roads like the back of his hand."

To Yarmo, Baghdad was an inexhaustible space, a labyrinth of endless streets and alleys that seemed to lead everywhere and nowhere. Before coming over, he'd spent a goodly amount of time memorizing its layout and major arteries. But out in the maze of high-walled streets, he never failed to feel anything but deeply lost, even with the GPS unit mounted below the dash that pinpointed their ever-shifting location down to the foot. Every time he left the wire into the city, he felt as though he were leaving his normal self behind and giving himself up to the whim of the streets, streets that were forever in play, always being dug up and impregnated with rigged ordnance, waiting for an American patrol to happen by. It was then, gazing through the thick glass of the Kamiono, that he had an uncanny flash of insight, the feeling that the city itself was alive, attentive, shifting its lanes and boulevards around them as they drove, keeping them lost. Then, just as suddenly as the thought had appeared, it vanished.

He sat listening to the blat and sizzle of the radio for a minute. There was always a radio going. It seemed to be an essential part of the soundtrack of the war. It was, in fact, the radio that had first given Yarmo the idea for the Terror Futures Market. One day, he'd wondered what it would be like if you could sample all the radio traffic in-country at once, going from one conversation to the next and yet somehow managing to comprehend it. What might that look like? He was soon Googling in earnest for acronyms and analogues involving the terms "operational," "insurgent," and "stock market," in search of a compelling initialization for his idea, having reverse-engineered dozens of failed DoD projects and deduced that oftentimes the tongue-worthiness of the abbreviation alone was the chief determinant of success or failure. For instance, Boeing's ill-fated Defense Intelligence-Logarithmic Deployable Operating System or DILDOS command-and-control suite had been bureaucratically-disappeared by the Pentagon's influential Science Advisory Board in the late nineteen-nineties after a number of signature Peter North latex monsters had materialized around Peesab's Arlington, Virginia, offices with the company logo stretching down the shaft. Without much ado, Yarmo had landed on the comparatively-innocuous Terror Futures Market (TFM) aka Tee-fem, the core functionality derived from a single field trip he'd taken while a student at Command and Staff College to the floor of the New York Stock Exchange. It was like so many things in Yarmo's intel career: once you had the title locked down, all the other bits and pieces came calling like Labradors to the sound of Purina being poured into a bowl.

Presently, the Kamiono slipped out of the maze of streets, and with a touching *honk-honk* cavorted past a set of sandbagged kiosks and out onto the arching expanse of the Fourteenth of July bridge, the span putting them on a collision course with the Puzzle Palace, the gringo Death Star, the Green Zone, the fabulous I.Z. Dawn had a bead on them and halfway across, at the height of the bridge and absolutely right on schedule, Yarmo saw the condensed symbol of the occupation in all its razor-wired splendor. Taking in an Arab dawn, with its ironclad promise of infernal heat had always felt to Yarmo like a shotglassful of antiquity itself and when his mind sought to understand the legions of time that had produced Uruk, Irak and then, ultimately Iraq, it was this eye-festival that he inevitably came back to: dawn, a sea of bronze light covering the land that grew imperceptibly until it burst suddenly over creation with a speed that strained credibility.

At the gate, Yarmo and the SAD crew were ordered out of their respective Kamionos and pointed toward a ring of ten-foot-tall concrete barriers known colloquially as "Texas barriers" while a group of Oklahoma National Guardsmen

appeared bearing rounded mirrors on poles, rubber mallets, flashlights and working dogs and began inspecting the Kamiono for explosives and various other unauthorized items. That they were ringed in by concrete provocatively named for their in-conference rivals seemed to aggravate the lot of them and they searched their vehicles with an inspired alacrity. National Guardsmen They rolled up complicated instruments on wheels. For a moment there didn't seem to be enough of the Kamiono to go around, and specialists pushed through to run their hands under the vehicle in search of magnetized mines or cell phone-actuated grenades.

A short private first class with a tiny head and horn-rimmed glasses soon arrived at a diagnosis.

"This vehicle is mis-labeled, sir."

"What, the Kamiono thing?"

"Yes, sir. Who does this vehicle belong to?"

"Us. I mean, Stratfuse."

"There's a new directive just down from higher about Trojan Horse Humvees that have been stolen by insurgents and loaded with sensing equipment."

"It's hard to explain, soldier. It's more of an inside joke with the guys."

"Going to have to impound it, sir."

"Son, you're crazy." It was beginning to look bad.

"No, sir. I was trained to locate Trojan Horses at Fort Sam Houston and while the school was unfortunately located in San Antonio, I can tell you with one-hundred-and-ten percent certainty that this vehicle isn't the genuine article."

"Let me get this straight, you think this Humvee is a forgery?"

"It's complicated, sir."

"Name for me one thing in this man's army that isn't complicated."

"My rifle, sir."

Just then, an even smaller Guardsmen in an agitated state appeared. "Hey, sir, I don't mean to interrupt your majorship and all," he said, as if being an officer were akin to a Shriner's parade, "but a call just came down to the guardshack from SINATRA, saying we're supposed to escort you over to their compound."

Sinatra. Yarmo knew this command grouping mostly by reputation. Of an unknown and in all probability unknowable staffing level, the Special Intelligence-National Authority Reconnaissance Activity (SINATRA) was a highly-evolved special operations lifeform in the American clandestine ecology, more post-geographic than global in reach, SINATRA enjoyed a version of *carte blanche* that, strictly speaking given the protean nature of information technology, had never existed before and the word around the campfire was that their *nom de*

guerre notwithstanding, “the Activity” as it was occasionally referred to, possessed their own specially-licensed Metallica “Damage, Inc.,” speed metal ringtone for the SecDef’s incoming calls. That they appeared to have their own entertainment law assets only deepened the air of mystery that SINATRA enjoyed and no doubt cultivated and it went without saying that they exercised a modicum of operational control over Sumo and his circle of poker buddies, though within the special operations world the lines of authority, owing to the demimonde’s disdain for rank, made control negotiable to the extent that Yarmo had long ago taken up the habit of thinking of the whole bunch as something akin to the local Iraqi tribes he sometimes met with.

“You messin with me, Tulsa?” Yarmo said in his best Oklahoman.

“Oh, no sir,” he said, visibly discombobulated. “I would never do something like that.”

Yarmo soon found himself being massaged into an unmarked Range Rover of unknown provenance.

“I’m sorry, sir, but I need to do this thing.” Tulsa said, handing him something that put a twist in his gut: a standard-issue, OD-green SERE sandbag worn into a kind of fuzziness through loving abuse.

“Son of a bitch,” Yarmo said with great irritation. “What gives with this secret squirrel bullshit? What did they tell you?” It struck him with no small amount of irony how much more he feared his sense-memories of SERE than anything out in the Baghdad streets.

“Sorry, sir, your helmet, please.”

Yarmo took it off and handed it to him. Tulsa took the bag back from him and with visibly trembling hands pulled it down over Yarmo’s mug.

And just like that he was back in a forsaken patch of Fort Bragg piney woods, the smell of his own bad breath being reflected back at him by the sandbag, his fatigue talking to him. He heard himself say: “I’m getting too old for this.”

“Won’t be long, sir.”

Perhaps twenty minutes worth of turns through Green Zone streets ensued, during which time Yarmo, help up on both sides by Guardsmen, found an unexpected blackness opening up inside him, like the falling of night and with no promise of dawn. There was only the sound of the Rover’s engine. A couple of times, Yarmo swore they were cutting laps around a traffic circle just to throw him off. He had no internalized surface map of the American Forbidden City, only a dim memory of satellite imagery and a sense of something being deeply wrong. He started to get sick. Wasn’t that one of childhood’s great lessons? Keep your eyes out

the window and you'll never get carsick? Didn't they realize that this would make him nauseous? Didn't guys from Oklahoma have childhoods, too?

Eventually the door beside him was thrown open and Yarmo was guided by a pair of firm hands out of the Range Rover and then haltingly up a long line of short steps, which made Yarmo feel like he had three legs. There didn't seem to be any direction he was heading in, only awkward movement from anywhere to anywhere, no destination just higher points in space where the hands bore him. Finally, he was guided through a wide, groaning front door which sounded like it was made of some sort of heavy wood. He almost tripped over the threshold which seemed to be a foot high at least. After a few more steps, a hand pressed firmly in the center of his chest halted him. He heard the heavy door close behind him. He stood there adrift, swaying to his heartbeat. Stared into the green mesh of bag, reeling, breathing deep lungfuls of conditioned air chilled so evenly that it hurt his teeth a little. Old fillings began to bother him. He stood there not sure if he should be scared or elated for a long time. And then it began, that uncanny time-slippage he'd first felt at SERE, the feeling of passing into some clockless region of the earth, a land beyond the reach of time. He stood there, blood pooling in his boots, his legs growing progressively numb for what could have been a minute or an hour. Swallowing hard, he tried to remember he was technically still in the I.Z. and that whatever forces were arrayed around him were friendly, at least in theory.

"Is someone waiting for a tip or something, cause, I don't know how to break this to you, but I left my fucking wallet back at Avalanche."

When nobody laughed or punched him in his already-tensed gut, he yanked the sandbag off his head and found himself blinking into the foyer of a big, white stone palace. It had one of those free marble staircases that could make even the lowliest private feel like the Prince of Wales. It rose to a gallery with a similar marble railing. Large hard chairs with full red plush seats were backed into the vacancy space underneath the staircase. They didn't look like anyone had ever sat in them. Like so many things from the early-Saddam era, the whole place had been built on a far grander scale than could ever realistically have been necessary. It was a beautiful place that stayed beautiful until you put any thought into it and then it got ugly fast when you realized all the lives that had been wasted in order to build it and then it was ugly and would always be ugly, at least to Yarmo, who'd visited most of the major palaces in Baghdad. The room was at least two stories tall and lit by a faux-crystal chandelier the size of the Range Rover he'd just stepped out of. The desert felt about a million miles away.

It was perfectly quiet until from a long way off, what in America might have been an entirely different zip code, Yarmo heard the echo of footsteps. They got louder until a durable-looking Asian girl in army workout gear appeared. She was covered in a thin veneer of sweat, her hair glistening. She stood there watching Yarmo watch her for a moment with the stiff, half-hard expression of someone noticing they're being noticed and wishing it would stop. Her jet black hair was drawn back tightly into a samurai ponytail, so tightly that it lost the effect of hair altogether, looking almost like a thin black crash helmet. Still, she was beautiful in a way that Yarmo found strangely unnerving.

"Nice weather you've got in here. The fuck are you, the butler?" The anger rising in him suddenly. "And what gives with fucking Guantanamo treatment? Last time I checked the Geneva Convention still applied to friendlies."

She held a hand up to shut him off and said in a flat unplaceable Midwestern voice, "The general will see you momentarily." It was then that he noticed that on her hands she wore thinly-padded leather fighting gloves, the sort favored by mixed-martial arts fighters, except that one of them said YIN and the other YANG in white letters.

"Are you a cage fighter?"

"Not exactly. I'm the General's Jiu-Jitsu partner."

"Which one?" He said irritably.

"Gracie Jiu-Jitsu mostly. I used to compete on the kickboxing circuit back in the day. Dabbled in Kano for awhile, but nothing too heavy duty."

"Thanks for the update, Sugar Ray. I meant which *General*."

"Oh. General Hollowell."

"That explains a lot."

"What the hell's that supposed to mean?"

"Don't you mean what the hell's that supposed to mean, *sir*?" It was cheap and Yarmo hated to do it, but pulling the rank card was simply the best he could do at the moment given his agitated state. Getting bagged and tagged had put him in a weird place and his fuse was shorter than normal, but just how short remained unclear to Yarmo.

"Sorry, sir, we play it loose here in the Activity and before we picked you up nobody told me you were an officer."

Hollowell and SINATRA. That totally figured. Hollowell had for a brief period led the task force that Command had sicced on bin Laden until the Iraq adventure, in its all-consuming glory, kicked off. A special ops guy of the oldest school, he was rumored to eat a single meal a day and operate for weeks on zero sleep not

out of any practical concern but instead because he felt that the practice of war required of its adherents a certain symmetry and that if he were to commit fully to the pursuit of the world's most dangerous terrorists he must pay homage to them by shedding the clothes of peacetime, taking his indulgences in jogging, extreme martial arts practice and an obscure form of Israeli yoga. Rumor had it that before he'd assumed command of the bin Laden unit, he'd further purified himself by having several elaborate Ranger tattoos featuring the typical skulls, snakes and dangerous transportation lasered off, an excision normally enacted by former military types once they started working for CIA in order to prevent compromising the mission in the event of capture. A show of leaving past loves behind, of forcible transfiguration, it synched nicely with the myth of the general as High Ninja Priest and as with any great and useful rumor, was almost completely unverifiable. It had, nonetheless served his Terror Market shareholders well.

The general's first tour in the sandbox was said to have impacted him deeply and after a year in postinvasion Iraq, he had retreated to an academic post at Fort Huachuca, the army's main intelligence base on the Arizona-Mexico border and written what was, depending upon who you were talking to, either the authoritative guide on hunting international terrorists or an officially-sanctioned affront to human rights, rule of law and the Geneva Convention. The volume, originally intended for wide circulation had been re-classified top secret and never assigned an official army volume number, as all manuals were, even in draft form. Few copies of the manual were known to exist and even those were said to be heavily-redacted versions photocopied in great haste, so that many of the pages had to be read at a diagonal and with an unusual appreciation for parallax, all of which added to the otherworldly dimension of the text, as if it had been downloaded directly from the collective unconscious of Command. The very title of the manual remained something of a mystery and was referred to only by its code name JUPRAK (which fit nicely into Yarmo's theory of acronyms, being both vaguely Slavic and brutal-sounding), and was rumored to be a cryptonym for an ongoing classified operation or "activity" of some unknowable conceit or dimension. According to the body of legend that had quickly risen after word of the manual leaked out, the general, a notorious martial arts freak, had written the entirety of JUPRAK as a series of koan-like, faux-Elizabethan couplets. A bewildered review of it had appeared in the online version of the Defense Intelligence Agency's in-house journal *Intellimatics* and then quickly vanished. Yarmo had, nevertheless, managed to get a screen grab of the review, which included a single tantalizing quote:

THE DEVIL WE KNOW, WHAT COULD BE BETTER THAN THEE?
THE DEVIL MADE BY THE HANDS WE KNOW, OF MY FRIEND
AND ME.

It was all too easy. Now that the Dardiri operation had wrapped with the help of Sumo and his boys, had Hollowell decided to have him bagged and delivered to his palace to lord the ruse over him? Had Sumo been in on it all along or was he as much a pawn as Yarmo and Stratfuse? This didn't fit with Yarmo's theory of military bureaucracy, which seemed to function on what some referred to as The Mushroom Principle: Keep Them in the Dark and Feed Them Horseshit. It was a truism that Pentagon types never collaborated with one other unless they were compelled by the force of law or by the sheer weight of extraordinary events. It was this very problem that had motivated Yarmo to create something like the Market, an open-source method for weighing the value of certain ideas, an end-around the old, ossified military "shit rolls downhill" mentality. But all this didn't jibe with what was happening now. How, for instance, did Hollowell know that he would be in the International Zone? It seemed unlikely that the word could have rebounded from the guardhouse flunkies to the SINATRA palace and back so quickly. Had they been tailing him all along? Yarmo was paranoid, but even his surveill-a-phobia had its limits. Yarmo didn't know the general personally and had never met him, nor, come to think of it, even seen a photograph of the man, but it was likely that he knew about his work and even more likely that he would enjoy poking the intel community, such as it was, straight in the jaundiced eye.

"You look kinda spun, sir, you alright?" Yinyang asked.

"Sorry. I was just rehearsing my name, rank and serial number routine."

"The General is waiting, sir."

Yarmo ran his hand over his face and mumbled something about the fog of war working both ways. She looked at him with a smiling face that wasn't really smiling and repeated what she had just said.

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